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HENRY OF NAVARRE



"The wine, tilting over, was emptied upon the floor."

HENRY OF NAVARRE

A ROMANCE

BY

MAY WYNNE

AUTHOR OF

"A MAID OF BRITTANY," "LET ERIN REMEMBER"
"FOR FAITH AND NAVARRE," ETC. ETC.

FROM THE PLAY "HENRY OF NAVARRE"
BY WILLIAM DEVEREUX



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MAY WYNNE'S NEW ROMANCE

MISTRESS CYNTHIA

HENRY OF NAVARRE

CHAPTER I

IN THE STREETS OF PARIS

PARIS was at its gayest. At least, so it would appear from the numerous illuminations of the buildings and the thronged streets, where gorgeous cavaliers in slashed pourpoints and doublets, with rich cloaks slung across their shoulders, jostled with men-at-arms, noisy-tongued women, and all the refuse from the halles and corners of the great capital, who mingled boldly with their betters as the darkness of night drew its mantle over rich and poor alike. But there were others in that strange and jostling crowd whose presence might well have caused comment from a stranger to Paris on that July evening in the year of grace 1572, for surely those sober-coated, grave-faced new-comers, who formed no inconsiderable portion of the populace, were no other than the Huguenots, those persecuted outcasts who till lately had been hunted as the wild beasts are hunted by their remorseless enemies—aye, and slain

as cruelly for no other crime than that of rejecting the Catholic faith and clinging with brave tenacity to their own religious doctrines.

Yes, Huguenots they were, crowding eagerly in the narrow streets, seeking lodgment with light hearts in the wolf's den, convinced indeed that, for the nonce, that wolf had turned lamb for their benefit.

Clouds of trouble had rolled aside, so said these trusting ones, and the sun of a happy peace and deliverance shone once more over their heads, for had they not the word of a king—even the King of France—that they should be safe? Yes, and behind that word the powerful proof of friendship in the fact that in three days' time the King's own sister—the fair Marguerite de Valois—would be wedded to the young King of Navarre, who was expected in Paris the next day.

No wonder Paris was gay.

From the gate of St. Marcel two men were seen pushing their way quietly through the crowd. Both were soberly dressed, with wide hats drawn close over their brows, and they walked as those who had business on hand; yet surely these were not Parisian-bred, for, as the labyrinth of streets confronted them, they paused, looking eagerly this way and that as though anxious to trace their road, yet neither knowing how nor caring to ask.

Suddenly the taller of the two stretched forth his hand and drew his companion into the shadow of a deep doorway.

A group of court exquisites was passing, keeping

themselves free of the none too savoury crowd by the ready pricking of the long rapiers each carried.

That they were persons of quality was manifest by the grudging respect shown to them by those who were near enough to see the colours which the servitors wore upon their sleeves.

"The Guise himself," breathed one of the two who crouched in the shadow of the doorway. "Ventre Ste. Gris ! a pleasant omen to greet me in Paris, de Mouhy."

"Hist, Sire, I would not that he should see us."

The party of courtiers was, by this time, opposite to their hiding-place, and, all unseen, the watchers could hear, easily enough, the conversation carried on between the two who walked first.

The flare of the torch had already revealed the features of these men, one a tall, handsome young fellow, carrying himself with the haughtiness of a prince, and clad in a suit of grey and silver ; the other shorter, more square, with a repulsive cast of countenance.

"So, so, my friend," the taller one was saying, "I think there will shortly be some masses to be sung in praise to Heaven for the cleansing of this our fair France from the lazar spot of heresy," and he laughed mirthfully.

"The Abbot of Ste. G  nevi  ve will doubtless be already practising his Te Deums," was the reply. "A worthy man, Your Grace, with a garden most conveniently situated."

"Our dear friends the Huguenots perhaps might not agree if they joined our company to-night," said he of

the silver and grey ; " but there is no doubt that they will know more about the Abbot's garden before long, if only Catherine can prevail with the King—who is worse than a fool."

By this time the speakers had passed out of earshot, but not out of sight. From the shadow of the doorway two dark figures flitted forth.

" You see, my dear de Mouhy," said the shorter, who was no other than the young King of Navarre himself, " I was not unwise in my fancy to learn something of how the wind blew in this dear Paris, before launching myself in the teeth of a gale."

De Mouhy bowed his head.

" What do you purpose doing, Sire ? "

" Learning, if possible, the secret of the Abbot's garden ; if the Guise is hatching it, you may be sure the fruit will not agree with Huguenot digestions."

" Your Highness is suspicious ? "

" It is but two months since my mother died in Paris, you remember, de Mouhy ? "

" Alas, Sire ! Can I ever forget ? Already, I begin to think it will be wiser to ride *from* Paris rather than into it to-morrow morning."

" Aha ! de Mouhy. It is easily seen that you are not seeking a bride. No, the trap is daintily baited—too daintily for the resistance of my appetite. Yet I believe in Fate, and shall hope to escape with bride and life into the bargain. Meantime, instead of looking so solemn, man, let us hasten forward. I am still devoured with curiosity concerning that garden."

"Sire, sire, you run unnecessary risks. Let us be quit of this city and return home."

"What! return to Navarre without a bride? And that because a Guise threatens? No, no, my friend. Come, they will yet give us the slip, and I repeat that I am curious."

It was no easy task to follow those who already were some distance ahead. The streets were narrow and abominably lighted, so that in the crowd, pursuit was wellnigh impossible. However, the pursuers might have gained their purpose had it not been for an unexpected diversion from the chase.

Passing down a narrow street which was almost deserted, the cry of a woman was borne to them sharply on the night air, and, even as the party of cavaliers turned a corner, a single, cloaked figure darted from an opposite angle, running headlong up the street, emitting piercing shrieks in accents of terror, whilst in hot pursuit came three men. "Ventre Ste. Gris," muttered Henry, "a doe with the hounds on her track. I wonder if she is fair. At any rate, I must take the risk." And he drew his sword.

De Mouhy uttered an exclamation of horror. "What, Sire! You will not risk your life in a street brawl?" And he made as though to seize his young master's arm.

But the girl, seeing the two men standing there, and the gleam of a naked blade, screamed again and fell, fainting, in the kennel which ran down the side of the road.

In another moment the three men had rushed forward.

but before they could reach their victim's side Henry had sprung to meet them.

"Cowards!" he cried, and forgot all about Guise and the Abbot's garden as he ran his keen sword point through the neck of the foremost ruffian.

De Mouhy was at his side in an instant, and only just in time, for Henry experienced some difficulty in withdrawing the blade upon which the full weight of his adversary's carrion lay, and, in the meantime, the others were upon him.

A sharp fight was that fought in the darkness and silence of the deserted alley with a woman's prostrate form betwixt the combatants. Yet it was soon over. Bravoes who chase a defenceless woman have seldom the stomach for cold steel, and though a second fell with de Mouhy's sword through his vitals, the third made good his escape, flying with dismal howls of fear from such avengers.

"Well," quoth Henry, with a short laugh, which rang with all the buoyancy of youth, "since by this time Guise is already trysting his Abbot, we may as well give up hope of joining so gay a party, and see what reward fair lips have for gallantry," and he approached the cloaked figure of the woman, who still lay in the gutter.

"A harridan or a beauty?" he added. "The latter, surely, if just reward be our meed." And he lifted the slender form in his arms, prepared to bear it towards the smoking glare of torchlight, which revealed the neighbourhood of an inn.

But the woman stirred, gasping with little broken sobs of returning consciousness, whilst she feebly struggled in his embrace. As she did so her hood slipped back from her disordered hair, and, even in the dim light, Henry perceived that she was very young and extraordinarily handsome, though her beauty was of too southern a type to proclaim her a French woman.

"Ah!" she gasped, "Mother of Heaven, I thank thee," and, slipping from Henry's arms, she stood, staring first at the dead, who lay there stark and stiffening, then at the men confronting her.

"Methinks, fair mistress," said Henry, bowing low, "that two good blades had more to do with your rescue than any Mother of Heaven. However, I make no claims, though I crave the privilege of escorting you homewards. From what yonder torchlight tells me, the streets of Paris are no fit place for so much beauty to be tripping in."

At the words the girl clasped her hands convulsively. "Home!" she cried, "ah! Santa Maria! What will my father think? He will be beside himself wondering what can have befallen his little Bianca."

"Bianca," quoth Henry softly. "Ma foi! A pretty name, is it not so, de Mouhy? Well suited to its owner."

"Nay, Sire," replied the other in an undertone, "to me both smack too much of Italy. However, it were well to see the girl home, and ourselves out of Piars as soon as may be."

"For the latter," Henry replied carelessly, "the gates will not be open till dawn; for the former, it is exactly what I purpose doing. Did you ever see such eyes? By my life—they could rival Marguerite's own, and her lips were evidently made for kisses."

"Sire," said de Mouhy gravely, "be not rash. Paris is full enough of pitfalls, without digging your own."

Henry laughed. "Oh, most wise and sober of counsellors," he cried, "will woman ever stir those slow pulses of yours, I wonder? *Ventre Ste. Gris!* she will be a clever damsel if she does. Meantime my charity demands that I should assist beauty in distress. Come, Bianca, we will see you home, if you will show us the way."

The last words were spoken in a louder key to the girl, who had been busy in drawing the folds of the cloak about her head and shoulders. To this Henry would have objected.

"The night is hot," he pleaded, "and if the moon hides her rays, we shall wander in darkness without finding our way."

But Bianca's soft voice interrupted him.

"Sir," she whispered, "already to you and your companion I owe more than life, for which I not only can never repay you, but must further claim that in your nobility and generosity you will see a poor girl safely disposed under her father's roof."

The trembling appeal in the voice touched Henry's heart, and though he longed to catch another glimpse at the fair face hidden beneath the hood, and look

again into those lustrous eyes, he refrained. "Come," he said kindly. "None shall molest you, pretty one, whilst you are under my protection."

Leaving the dead bodies of the two men, without troubling to make further investigations, the three set out once more, winding in and out amongst the narrow alleys which the girl trod unhesitatingly, in spite of the darkness of the summer night, stopping at last before a high, gloomy-looking house set at the further extremity of an unlighted street.

The house indeed was sinister enough to merit the whispered word of de Mouhy, who urged upon his master the folly of entering such an abode. But Henry was minded to see the adventure to its close, and followed his conductress up a narrow flight of stairs and into a small room on the right-hand side.

Here burned a lamp, and, as the heavy curtain before the door fell back with a swish of soft velvet into its place, both Henry and de Mouhy gazed around them with some astonishment. A strange apartment was that, bare of furniture, yet draped in gay oriental hangings interwoven with fantastic devices and hieroglyphics; a faint odour of drugs pervaded the atmosphere, whilst, heaped in a corner, was a weird medley of emblems of mortality, such as skulls, bones, and the like.

At a round table, on which was set a small silver lamp, sat a man, short and slender in figure, but with a long black beard, and the head and face of one of far greater height. His nose was long, his eyes dark and piercing,

whilst his thin, white fingers displayed strange nervousness as they wandered amongst the phials which were set before him, phials which contained liquids of many hues, from deepest crimson to palest green.

At sight of his daughter this remarkable person sprang to his feet, and, with a cry of delight, opened his arms to embrace her.

In a moment Bianca had flung herself into their loving shelter, and was sobbing out her tale.

Her father listened with patience, though his eyes wandered constantly from her towards the men who stood in the doorway, and at first sight of whom he had started visibly.

When the tale was concluded he gently unfastened the girl's clinging arms from about his neck, and advanced towards Henry and de Mouhy.

"Sire," he said, and his voice was as silken and soft as a woman's, "you have earned the everlasting gratitude of Cosmo Ruggieri."

The style of address had already convinced Henry that he was in the presence of one of those astrologers whose occult art was so high in favour of the superstitious of those days, but, at the last words, a storm-cloud swept over the young Prince's face.

"Cosmo Ruggieri!" he exclaimed, "the Queen's poisoner!"

Again the fellow bowed low. "The Queen's perfumer would sound better."

Henry's eyes blazed. "And my mother's murderer!" His hand sought his sword, but a cry

from Bianca and a word of warning from de Mouhy stayed him.

"You are mad, Sire," muttered de Mouhy. "This house, like all Paris, is probably full of your enemies; to slay one—and in especial one such as he—will bring the hornet's nest about our ears."

Henry was shaking with rage, but his hand relaxed its grip on his sword-hilt. "Cosmo Ruggieri," he muttered, "the man I have sworn to slay," then—turning fiercely to the Italian, who stood calmly smiling with arms folded on his breast—"aye, and will slay. When next we meet, do not hope from this clemency to escape your fate, sirrah." But Ruggieri only smiled, though whether in scorn, amusement, or devilry it were hard to say. "Sire," he observed, "it is true we shall meet again, and I, too, will not be forgetful of the debt I owe you."

The girl Bianca stood in the background with wide eyes staring into Henry's passion-distorted face. Her cloak thrown aside, her beauty of form and feature were more clearly revealed. It was indeed for her sake, rather than from any sense of his own danger, that Henry allowed de Mouhy to lead him away.

Bianca sighed as she saw him go, but her father laughed, catching her in his arms. "There goes a king," quoth he.

CHAPTER II

THE SPREADING OF THE NET

THE Duc de la Rochefoucauld yawned, lay back in his velvet-covered chair, languidly selected a sweetmeat from the jewelled comfit-box in his hand, and yawned again.

After all, lolling about in the Louvre, sleeping and idling by day and dancing and carousing at night, was not so much to his taste as hunting the bear and the wolf in the Pyrenees, or the deer and boar in the woods of Jurançon. Still, when one comes to Rome one does as the Romans do, and already Monsieur le Duc had learnt to dress, although he could still scorn to paint his cheeks and perfume his person, like the foppish gentlemen of the Duc d'Anjou's train.

Dress, however, took quite a prominent part in the thoughts of the young Huguenot leader, and he was earnestly discussing the choice of a costume for the evening's masque as he lolled at ease in one of the sumptuous apartments of the Louvre on that hot July day.

A new-comer, entering the room, brought a smile to the Duke's lips. Here was no brilliant-plumaged courtier, but one dressed in all the sober simplicity of

the Huguenot, with a face stamped with grave foreboding and melancholy.

Without rising de Rochefoucauld stretched forth a hand of greeting.

"Welcome, de Mouhy, welcome to the Louvre. Parbleu! I have not seen you since Moncontour. Times have changed since then, like Fortune herself. 'Tis a jade who turned her face from us on that black day when, for we Huguenots, hope itself seemed to have vanished, but now, 'tis a different tale. Coligny hath the King's ear, and not even the Guise can get a hearing when he is by. Therefore, 'twill be down with the League, and huzzah for the Huguenots when Henry binds himself by this marriage with the ties of brotherhood to the King. But why this dull suit, man? You come to a wedding, not to a funeral. You will disgrace us with the fair ladies of the Flying Squadron—Catherine's Guard of Honour."

De Mouhy bowed. He had not forgotten the adventures of last night, nor the ominous mutterings of the Parisian populace as he and his master shouldered their way through the crowd. One does not seek for truth in a palace, and Henry had shown his shrewdness in fathoming the true sincerity of his welcome amongst those whose tongues were unguarded by the subtle reins of intrigue.

That Paris loved her Huguenot guests as little as the Medici herself had been plain to Henry and de Mouhy long ere they reached the St. Marcel Gate, but for all de Mouhy's pleadings, Henry had remained firm in his

resolve to enter what in very truth bore suspicious resemblance to a trap.

The light-hearted de Rochefoucauld was not, however, given to presentiments, neither had he troubled to look deeper than the dazzling gloss on the exterior of things.

It was the time for dancing, for feasting, for toasting, with Hymen to preside over the revels, even if Cupid seemed to be absent from the marriage feast.

"Get a new suit, my friend," he cried, as de Mouhy stood silent, fingering the black ribbon about his neck. "You will repent else, when bright eyes cry shame on you for a spoil-sport."

De Mouhy glanced down with something akin to pity at the bright, handsome face of the young man who, for all his newly acquired foppery, was a gallant youth who had fought bravely for the Cause in the past and bore an honourable and unsullied name.

"If I wear black," quoth he, "'tis like my master. You are gay, Monsieur de Rochefoucauld, but Henry of Navarre has not forgot that but two months back his mother was poisoned in this palace."

De Rochefoucauld was silent for a moment, toying with the hilt of his dagger. "The brave Queen Jeanne," said he. "Heaven rest her soul—it was an ill tale, yet but a tale, de Mouhy. How could it be otherwise? Would Catherine murder the mother when she purposed giving her own daughter to the son? The gift of the Pearl of France seals the love of the King of France to the King of Navarre, so wear a bright face, man, and

cast such gloomy fears to the winds. I tell you Charles loves us as much as he hates and fears the Guise. Take my advice, and, if you dream of danger, let it be no more than that which lurks for you in pretty eyes, and for *that* warfare arm yourself becomingly, as have I," and the young man looked down complacently at the suit of peach-coloured velvet which adorned his well-knit figure.

Before de Mouhy could reply, the curtain which hung over the door was pushed aside, and a fair-haired page announced in shrill tones the coming of the Duc de Guise.

De Mouhy started and drew back into the shadow, as there entered the apartment the same youthful noble whom he and Henry had watched unseen in the shadows of the Rue d'Averon. Although only in his twenty-third year, Guise carried himself with all the dignity of a man—almost, one might have said, of a prince—and indeed as head of the Holy Catholic League, he was little less powerful in France than the King himself.

He was talking earnestly to Monsieur de Besme, who accompanied him, but, at sight of de Rochefoucauld, broke off, setting his face in a mask of assumed friendliness. But de Rochefoucauld, little versed in the atmosphere of Court intrigue, looked up smiling. "Ah, Monsieur de Guise," he cried lightly, "do you dance in the masque to-night? It is to be gorgeous beyond belief. Bernard Palissy has designed it and Etienne Leroy is to sing."

Guise looked somewhat gloomily at the speaker.

"To sing?" he repeated, echoing the other's words absently.

"Aye," nodded de Rochefoucauld, too absorbed in his topic to notice the glance which passed between the Duke and his companion. "But the masque is the centre of attraction, no less than Paradise itself is to be depicted, before whose gates stand the King and his brothers, Anjou and Alençon, defending them against the assaults of Henry of Navarre, Condé, and myself. Their skill renders the gates impregnable, it is only of the King's great generosity that at last we gain admittance."

Again the Duke exchanged meaning glances with de Besme.

"So," he said slowly, "the King speeds you to Paradise? I should not have believed it."

"An allegory," laughed de Rochefoucauld, "and a dainty one, in truth. What! do you not take its meaning? Nay! it would show that where arms fail love prevails, and Henry of Navarre gains Paradise and the Pearl of France together."

"A charming allegory indeed," sneered Guise, "though I fear there is no part for me to play in it."

De Rochefoucauld rose, yawning. "It grows late," said he. "Come, de Mouhy, I must prepare my costume. In such an assault as one plans for to-night one is careful of one's toilet," and he left the room, followed by his friend.

The mask seemed to be lifted from the face of Henry de Guise as the curtain fell once more into its place

behind the two Huguenot leaders,—a look of triumph, savage in its intensity, lit up his handsome features.

“Fools,” he muttered to de Besme. “Could we ever be so blind, and dance while death danced with us?”

De Besme smiled—it is easy to be wise behind the scenes. “When is it to be?” he asked.

Guisse frowned as he paced restlessly to and fro. “To-night, if the King but agrees. What opportunity could be more favourable? Music and laughter lull all suspicion, the air is filled with marriage bells, and lips are too busy with kisses to whisper ‘treason.’ They are in a net, de Besme; not one can escape—if only Charles consents; but that is the difficulty. Once let this Béarnais come with his talk of hunting and hawking, and his rude, peasant laughter, and our plan may be ripped to pieces. If only Anjou were king——”

He paused, his dark eyes fierce with excitement, as, once more, the page entered with the shrill cry—

“The Queen-Mother, the Duc d’Anjou.”

Guisse turned swiftly to greet the stately lady, who slowly entered the apartment, followed by her son.

No one to look into the calm placid face of Catherine de Medici would have found it possible to credit her with being the monster of cruelty that she was represented. Her dark eyes were steady and inscrutable, pools which told no secrets—which indeed might well have been innocent of possessing any; her features were regular and expressionless, her figure stout but

well-proportioned. She was dressed in a rich robe of black satin, and carried herself with dignity. Behind her lolled Henry of Anjou, an effeminate youth, dressed in the extreme of fashion, his cheeks painted, his hair curled, his movements languid. As he stood there behind his mother, idly caressing the tiny dog he held in his arms, it was difficult to believe that this was the hero of Jarnac and Moncontour, whose courage and skill in battle had already won him renown, and been the cause of considerable jealousy with his elder brother Charles.

Just now he was simpering rapidly at himself in a mirror as Guise, bowing low before the Queen-Mother, addressed her with enthusiasm.

"Madame, my felicitations. At last—at last our plans are crowned with success. Nine years of waiting. Nine years, Madame, since I watched beside my father's murdered body at Orleans. I plucked the dagger from his side and the life-blood flowed; it was then that I swore that life-blood should again flow at its bite, and that Coligny should die. Aye, and every Huguenot in France to bear him company to Purgatory. I have been growing, Madame, since that day, and my hate has grown with me."

Catherine smiled, and, as she did so, one caught a glimpse of white teeth, and was reminded instinctively of a softly purring cat.

"You have done well, Monsieur de Guise," she said, with emphasis, "and you are sure all are prepared?"

Guise bowed, dropping his voice a little as Anjou

moved away, intent on the set of a curl. "There are more in Paris to cry, 'Mort aux Huguenots' than even you dream, Madame," he whispered.

Catherine's eyes flashed.

"And they are armed?"

"Yes, Madame, and await but the signal to pour from their hiding-places."

"You are clever, Monsieur de Guise."

Guise shrugged his shoulders. "Nay, Madame," he replied carelessly. "Rather congratulate the worthy Abbot of St. Genéviève. His gardens are most conveniently bordered by the walls of the town, wherefore the sentries at the gate do not always need to know the names of his visitors."

Catherine nodded. "It is well," she said. "As you say, failure is impossible," and she folded her small white hands complacently together, as though lost in admiration of their long taper fingers. They were beautiful hands.

"Paris will be merry," said the Duke, with a sinister smile; "but those who wear not the white cross in their hats or the white band on their arm will not soon desire to join in another such revel."

"A wise plan," murmured Catherine; "half measures are useless. Heresy must be stamped out at all costs, and these trusting fools must die, lest perchance they prove something more than fools to France. Yet fools indeed I count them to thus dance on the edge of the precipice, and never dream of danger. An Italian would not be so easily duped."

"They are blinded by this marriage," replied Guise, "and do not trouble to look farther than the bridal altar. As for Coligny, his dreams are of Flanders, and the glory awaiting him there."

"His awakening is likely to prove elsewhere than in Flanders," murmured Catherine; "but there is Henry of Navarre to be counted with."

"What! The Béarnais? Take no thought of him, Madame. A loutish country lad, King on sufferance, bred on garlic and mountain air, content to eat and hunt, drink and make love."

"Yet it is he of whom I am afraid. Cosmo Ruggieri says he will be king."

"Cosmo Ruggieri! A conjuror's tale, Madame, nothing more."

"A conjuror's tale! Yes, but this same Ruggieri's father foretold my husband's death. The Court laughed at him, but all the world knows that Henry Second fell to Montgomery's lance."

"The best way to cheat a prophecy is to fulfil it. Crown his dead head like the Welsh Prince of old."

"If all the others live, I swear that Henry shall die. Listen, Guise. Year after year have I not fought with foes at home and foes abroad, played one against the other, smiled with my heart on fire, flattered when I might not strike? I have seen another woman by my husband's side, and heard him sing her praises. I have endured all, *all*, that my sons should reign. I have kept France a kingdom, when her Princes' would have dismembered her. I have saved the crown—for whom?

For Henry of Navarre? Never! Oh, that I were a man! I would strangle him with my own hands." As she spoke Catherine's face became transformed with passion, whilst her words came so hotly, though whispered in an undertone, that they resembled nothing more than the angry hiss of a serpent.

It was certain that at least she and Guise were on common ground in their hatred of the Huguenots.

As he listened even the sombre face of the young Duke relaxed.

"Have no fear, Madame," he said soothingly; "he will not escape."

Catherine was repeating the words as though they proved to be some balm to her restless spirit, when the page, Aurèle de Brie, announced the coming of the Princess Marguerite.

CHAPTER III

"I WILL NOT WED THE BÉARNAIS"

A DULL flush crept up under Guise's swarthy skin, and he drew back a little as the young Princess swept into the room, followed by one of her ladies.

In the first flush of womanhood Marguerite was held—and not unjustly—to be the most beautiful woman in France at this period. Slender, graceful, with masses of dark hair which framed a small, round face and lustrous dark eyes, she was Princess and "Marguerite" in a breath, whilst the erect carriage of her slight figure, and the flash and sparkle of her eyes, told that she was already fully conscious of her powers.

Behind her came Mademoiselle Belleforêt her favourite lady, a piquant little person set in diminutives like some dainty Dresden shepherdess, excepting for a pair of fine blue eyes which danced with merriment, for Marie Belleforêt was scarcely seventeen, and life at present was little more than a playground, with no dark shadows to disturb her fears, and nothing more serious to concern her than Cupid's battles.

But a tiny furrow showed itself in Marguerite's white brow as she curtsied to her mother, whilst the eager question rose to her lips—

"He has come, you have seen him?"

Catherine smiled. "What—the King of Navarre?"

"Yes, yes. Has he arrived?"

It was Guise who replied, stepping forward with all the graceful assurance of a courtier whose interruption is sure to be permitted.

"Yes, the Béarnais is here," he said in a low voice, his brilliant eyes fixed meaningly upon the paling face of the girl.

"Alas!" sighed Marguerite, her own lids drooping under that steady gaze, whilst her small hands were locked as though in momentary despair. "Then my last hope is gone. I have so hoped and hoped he would not come. It is true that I heard he had started on his journey, but still I prayed that something might turn him back."

Catherine and Guise exchanged quick glances.

"Why?" demanded the former sharply. "What should turn him back?"

"Has not the King given his word for his safety in Paris?" added Guise.

Marguerite raised her eyebrows slightly as she looked from one to the other, then she laughed, a little silvery laugh like the tinkling of fairy bells. "I was not thinking of his safety," she replied. "The Béarnais may be rude and coarse, but he is no coward. He has been bred a mountaineer. I have heard stories of his courage."

"He is a simple lad," said Catherine soothingly.

"You need not fear, Margot. The moment he sees

you he will be at your feet. Go, child, it is fitting that you should robe yourself to meet this husband that is to be."

But at these words Marguerite shuddered.

"No, no," she cried. "Mother, I will not marry this Béarnais—I cannot. It is useless for you or my brother Charles to command me. I would rather—yes, I believe that I would rather enter a convent. Besides, think what it means. I am a Catholic—he a *Huguenot*, mother. It is against my conscience to marry such."

Catherine's smile was smoothly feline.

"Have no fear for your soul, my Margot," she purred. "The King has sent to Rome for a dispensation. You will still be a Catholic after your marriage. Nay! you may even convert this stubborn heretic and win him back to the arms of Holy Mother Church."

Marguerite sighed. "I cannot wed him," she reiterated. "Picture to yourself the desolation of it, and have pity, mother. To marry a man who cares for nothing but hunting and his dinner, to live with him away from this gay Court which I love, away from my poets, my music, everything that makes life worth living. No, I cannot, I cannot!"

From her mother's impassive face her eyes turned appealingly towards Guise. But Catherine's gaze was on the Duke's face too, and he could only falter out—

"You have never seen him, Princess."

"I once met him at Blois. It is true we were but children, but I have never forgotten it. He boxed my ears, I ate his sweets, he called me greedy, and then I pulled his hair."

In spite of her earnestness a lurking smile dimpled Marguerite's cheek at the remembrance.

"He is a man now," said Guise, echoing the Queen's words, yet with added meaning, "and will be like every other man, at your feet." And he bowed nearly to the ground.

But this time Marguerite did not meet his glance.

"I wonder," she mused. "He certainly had a nose and chin even then, and his eyes told the tale that he was not born to be ruled by a woman. So, if he lives for hunting and eating *now*, he will do the same after marriage, therefore it is doubly certain that I will not wed him."

"Talk not so foolishly, girl," reprimanded her mother. "Your brother Charles is set on it. Be careful how you thwart him. His mad fits grow on him until even I tremble for myself. I can do nothing." And, turning away from her daughter's pleading face, she walked to the window.

There were tears in the Princess's eyes as she turned to Guise.

"You see," she whispered, "my own mother is against me. Monsieur de Guise, you are the foremost Catholic in France. Can you not save me from this outrage?"

The appeal was not without its effect. Yet the

young man hesitated, with an anxious glance towards Catherine, who still gazed out of the window.

"There is one way," he murmured, "but it is desperate."

Marguerite flashed him a look from beneath veiled lashes.

"Surely danger will not stop the Duc de Guise?" she replied.

The look and the words threw the usually cautious nobleman off his guard.

"If the reward be great enough," he said, adding in a rapid undertone, "My uncle, the Cardinal of Lorraine, is all-powerful at Rome. It is possible that the dispensation might be stopped, but—if so, may I hope—hope that the most beautiful woman in France will not be cruel to me?"

Marguerite hesitated, and Guise, emboldened by her silence, would have raised her hand to his lips, but that she snatched it away, colouring furiously.

"Monsieur le Duc!" she cried.

It was Guise's turn to flush, with bent head he turned to go, but Marguerite checked him.

"Stop the dispensation," she whispered, "and my gratitude shall end only with my life."

The Duke caught her hand once more, this time it was not withdrawn. "Will it only be gratitude?" he whispered. "Only gratitude, *ma mie*?"

Yet her answer, unread in downcast eyes, unspoken by rosy, pouting lips, was not to be given at all, for at that moment a stir was heard without, and the King

of France, attended by his gentlemen, entered the room.

It was difficult to find anything kingly in Charles IX—a slouching, uncouth young man, with shambling gait and a nervous, restless manner, pale of face, plain of feature, with coarse lips and wandering blue eyes, which betokened a feeble and ill-regulated mind, there was yet something strangely pathetic in this unhappy monarch's face, a mute appeal against Fate and—his mother.

Gentle and retiring by nature, of a sensitive and religious disposition, Catherine had striven remorselessly to mould him into a cruel tyrant, and, only partially succeeding, had produced the pitiful wreck which was far short of being all bad, and yet possessed by that engrafted passion of almost insane cruelty which was to prove his ruin.

At present, however, the young King was in uproarious spirits, laughing and jesting with Marshal de Tavannes, who walked by his side; the sight of his mother was the occasion for a fresh burst of merriment.

"Ha, ha," he cried gaily, "now we have the wolf by the ears. It was an excellent idea, this marriage. Confess, mother, did I not play the part well?"

Catherine glanced towards Marguerite, from whose side Guise had withdrawn on the entrance of the King.

"Margot," she said sharply, "you may retire."

The Princess dropped a profound curtsey, and slowly passed towards the door, followed by Mademoiselle

Belleforêt, who had been amusing herself since she entered the apartment in glancing through a volume of Ronsard's poems.

At the door, however, Marguerite turned, and, impelled by sudden impulse, stepped to her brother's side.

"Sire, Sire," she cried pleadingly, "must this marriage take place? You will not permit this outrage. You will not allow your little Margot to be made miserable."

Charles stared at her vacantly, his under lip thrust out. "Miserable?" he repeated dully, then burst into fresh laughter. "What, you don't like Harry? You are a fool, sister. Harry is a good fellow. I like him; he is fond of the chase, too."

"He is a Huguenot," whispered Marguerite, and looked at Guise.

The Duke approached.

"The dispensation has not arrived, Sire," he added. The interference was not wise.

Charles frowned ominously, whilst his mouth began to twitch, as it did when his passions grew hot.

"You, too, against me, Guise? And Anjou?—he is in the plot. Nay, frown not at me, sir. Get you gone, girl, to receive your lover."

It was a last hope vanishing, and Marguerite was in despair.

"But, Sire——" she began.

Charles interrupted furiously.

"Mort de ma vie! Did you not hear me? Remember that I am the King, whose only bad

subjects seem to be in my own family. Get you gone, I say."

Frightened at his vehemence, Marguerite turned away, whilst Guise, who stood by fuming in impotent rage, bowed stiffly to the King.

"I leave Your Majesty," he said coldly, "to your Huguenots. When, Sire, you have need of your loyal Catholics, the Guise will be the first to join you."

Charles was still frowning, even after Guise, followed by de Besme, had left the apartment. It was Catherine who now laid her hand on her son's shoulder, with that soft, caressing touch which seemed to possess some subtle, mesmeric power over him.

"You are imprudent, Charles," she murmured gently. "You fawn upon these heretics until even I know not if you are sincere. Remember our purpose. The purpose blessed by Holy Mother Church, the purpose which will set you triumphing over your enemies, and raise you in your people's love and reverence. Surely you do not relent?"

"Relent," cried the King, though he threw off his mother's hand as though the touch stung him. "Relent! Parbleu! Is it likely? Shall I so soon forget my ride through Gascony? The desolation, the bare monasteries, the broken altars, the mutilated saints. I even saw a mongrel dog with a rosary for collar. A godless land where not a mass was heard from morn to night. It chilled me to the heart."

"The time has come for retribution, Sire," exclaimed Marshal de Tavannes eagerly. "Paris is prepared

to take vengeance on such deeds, which cry aloud to Heaven for redress. You have but to say the word, and the Huguenots will be exterminated."

The eyes of all present were fastened upon the King, who stood gnawing his lip, evidently hesitating in his decision.

Then suddenly his hand clenched.

"Dead, all dead—yet stay, Harry and 'Foucauld would be dead, and—I like them, they amuse me. Harry is the best company in the world, and as for 'Foucauld, I would sooner have him by me than the Guise or any of his cursed brood."

Catherine, only half hearing the muttered words, bent forward her steady eyes on her son's wavering face.

"You consent, Charles?" she said softly.

"Consent?" he repeated vaguely, staring at her as he had at Marguerite, till his gaze became fixed upon those calm, inscrutable black eyes. "Consent to have them killed?" He shuddered, his mood changing. "Nay," he said, "we will wait, wait till after the marriage. At present I amuse myself, and Harry is good company. Besides, if I cut down Navarre, the Guise will grow too tall. Did you not mark his look but now as he left our presence? I would have him remember that Charles of Valois—not Henry of Guise—is King of France. Bah! I weary of all this talk of killing and treachery. Come, Tavannes, let's to the smithy; I will work there till dinner."

With a gesture of impatience Catherine turned to-

wards her favourite son, the Duc d'Anjou, who, at the word "smithy" had raised a scented handkerchief to his nose with a gesture of disgust.

But Charles, ever watchful in spite of his waywardness, saw the action, which aroused his instant indignation. With an oath he snatched at the dainty morsel of cambric and lace, and, smelling it, flung it to the ground.

"Faugh!" he exclaimed in contempt, "you smell like Ruggieri's perfumery. Learn to be a man, idiot, or I'll teach you. You are my heir. Is it not so, mother? My heir, but not the King of France yet."

His glance was full of meaning, not unmixed with a lurking hatred, which drove the colour momentarily from the Duke's painted cheeks. He was aware both of his brother's suspicions and his dislike—sometimes the knowledge made him afraid.

CHAPTER IV

THE QUEEN-MOTHER'S PERFUMER

CATHERINE OF MEDICI and her son Henry sat alone in a chamber of the Louvre. A chamber richly furnished and with walls hung with tapestries depicting scenes of the chase. A subtle scent of perfume pervaded the apartment.

Anjou was still playing with the dog which he held in his arms, but his eyes were fixed on the door.

"He should be here," said Catherine softly, interpreting the look of expectation, and, even as she spoke, a faint tapping was heard at the door. "Enter," cried the Queen-Mother, whilst her son rose suddenly to his feet, setting the dog on the ground, whilst his hand sought the high ruff about his throat as though it choked him.

Meantime a man had silently entered, closing the door behind him, and standing on the threshold, as if awaiting further commands. A short, slender man, clothed in black, with a long black beard, and head and face several sizes too large for the rest of his body.

It was Cosmo Ruggieri, the astrologer—perfumer—poisoner—in a word, the Queen-Mother's *fidus achates*.

Catherine motioned him nearer, whilst instinctively Anjou edged away.

"You have recast the horoscope?" demanded Catherine eagerly.

The Italian bowed.

"As you did direct, Madam. It is, as my father said, Three sons of Catherine shall reign, and, after the third, the Béarnais.'"

Catherine's lips tightened.

"Always the same! Always the same! The Béarnais! Yet it is possible sometimes even to outwit Fate herself. Did you consult the omens?"

"As you commanded. Always the three cries, symbolic of three deaths."

"Charles, Anjou, Alençon! Always the same. But there is still the mirror, Ruggieri."

"It would tell the same tale. My art cannot lie."

"The face of the Béarnais, with the crown of France surmounting its brow. It would madden me even to see the reflection. Yes, it would madden me, and—ah! the King! What would *he* say, did he see it too? The Béarnais is good company, as the Béarnais—but as King of France! That would be a different tale. So, Ruggieri, your power shall rival, aye! and conquer Fate, the fickle jade, herself. Before the King and the whole Court you shall show us the Béarnais in the mirror, crowned King—and, if Charles endures the sight,—well! I acknowledge that Fate triumphs over me. Yet I am not afraid. What do you say, Henry? The Béarnais crowned! Why, Charles

will go mad in earnest, and kill him where he stands."

Anjou glanced from the dark face of the astrologer to that of his mother. At that moment Catherine had forgotten her mask, and every feature was lighted up with triumph.

Her enthusiasm was contagious, yet Anjou laughed uneasily.

"Aye, he would kill me, his own brother, if he thought I coveted the crown. We have the fox at last, mother. The thought is superb. As you say, Charles will go mad. In the meantime I must meet de Guise and practise my dance for this evening," and, nodding carelessly to the astrologer, he made his way hastily from the room, muttering beneath his breath: "I have no love for such horoscope-casting. Charles, Anjou, Alençon, and Henry of Navarre—the list is too long for my taste, morbleu!"

No sooner were they alone than Catherine turned eagerly to Ruggieri.

"You have the . . . the other things I spoke of?"

The astrologer placed his hand within his robe and drew forth a small phial, which he silently handed to the Queen, watching her with a peculiar smile on his swarthy features as she turned it about in her hand, holding it at last to the light.

"You have made a mistake!" she exclaimed, impatiently. "Look! the phial is empty." As their eyes met the smile seemed to have faded from Ruggieri's face.

"There is enough poison to kill ten men in it, Madam," he replied, "and yet it is invisible to sight as it is to taste."

"Excellent," murmured Catherine in her softest tones. "He shall drink it in the rarest vintage, aye, and his bride shall hand it to him. You will not be the poorer on the day Navarre loses her king, Cosmo."

Ruggieri bowed, yet it was possible that beneath his flowing beard he might have smiled again without the lynx eyes of the Queen detecting it.

"If this should fail, Madam," he replied, "there are subtler means of tricking Fate."

Catherine leant forward on her carved seat eagerly: "More subtle than *this*?"

"Yes, Madam," and, again placing his hand within his robe, the astrologer drew forth a tiny packet, which he placed in the Queen's extended palm. "Throw this powder on the fire, and, within ten minutes, every living thing in the room will be dead; ten minutes more the smoke will have vanished, and only death remain."

Catherine made haste to hide the precious packet in a small jewelled pouch she wore at her girdle.

"I like it well," she said, with a cold laugh; "the wine cup and the perfumed glove are left behind, but the smoke vanishes. You are a genius, Ruggieri, yet no man loves you; even the King shrinks from the mention of your name."

This time Ruggieri made no effort to conceal the

smile which lighted up his dark eyes with momentary fire.

"Some, Madam," he said slowly, "are desirous of inspiring a passion which is even stronger and certainly more useful than love itself."

"And that?"

"Fear, Madam."

Catherine nodded. "It is true, Cosmo, but in inspiring fear one often invokes another passion which is dangerous and not at all useful—hatred."

The astrologer shrugged his shoulders.

"I, Madam, have found that the weaker vessel, hatred, can be made handmaiden to fear."

"Not in the breast of the Béarnais. Henry of Navarre has sworn your death. Men say that you killed his mother with a pair of perfumed gloves. Still, do not let the threat alarm you; avoid the Béarnais till *after* he drinks his bride's health on their wedding-day."

Ruggieri bowed.

"I thank you, Madam, but . . . I do not fear the Béarnais."

If Catherine intended to ask the meaning of these words, her purpose was frustrated, for, at this moment, the sound of footsteps was heard approaching, whilst high above others rose the round clear notes of Marguerite's voice.

Instantly the Queen-Mother started to her feet, and, drawing aside the tapestry behind her chair, disclosed a secret door.

"Quick," she whispered, signing to Ruggieri to follow her. "My daughter must suspect nothing, or my plans are undone."

The room was empty when Marguerite, followed by Marie Belleforêt, entered.

CHAPTER V

A PRINCESS SCORNE

THE Princess Marguerite was flushed with excitement, her large, expressive eyes brilliant with a restless agitation which was further evinced in the rapid loosening and clasping of her fingers.

"Marie," she cried, with a sigh of relief at finding the room empty, "what shall I do? Charles forgets that he is my brother, forgets his little Margot whom, till now, he has petted and indulged in every caprice, and remembers only that he is a king whose duty it is to sacrifice me for—for the Huguenots. Bah! these Huguenots whom I hate, every—every one of them, from Henry de Bourbon to the scullion who rolls up his eyes and sings the hymns of Calvin!"

A dimple, vainly repressed, struggled into being in Marie Belleforêt's soft cheek.

"Have comfort, Madame," she murmured, "the King of Navarre may not be so bad. He fought bravely at Jarnac and Moncontour, and——" she paused, with an irresistible twinkle in her eyes. "And they *say* the Gascons are the most ardent lovers."

"Then he will pay me compliments," retorted her mistress. "Poof! any fool can blow bubbles, but

try to grasp one in your hand, and you catch at emptiness. I am tired, tired of them all. Oh! if I could only meet a man!"

Marie dropped a demure little curtsey.

"There are many at Court."

"Who would vow devotion to the Princess and push by her with contempt if she were a serving wench. Do I not know it? They forget that princesses have hearts. Hearts, alive, warm, throbbing—not for compliments, Marie, but for love—love,—that is what a princess of France must go hungry for, and all envy her because of the glitter and pomp of her exalted position, little guessing that the bright bubble is emptiness within! All emptiness! And that she would give all for a man's honest love for her—herself, the woman, not princess. Once for a moment I dreamt ——."

"For a moment, Madame, tell me, you dreamt ——?"

Marie's voice grew coaxing as Marguerite checked herself.

The Princess smiled. "A princess may dream, may she not? Well! I dreamt that day as I leant from my casement, here in Paris, watching the crowd beneath. The sun shone, the crowd was gay—and so was I. I laughed aloud, Marie, for the very joy of living, when, from the throng below, two eyes shone into mine. My cheek warmed, and—I knew not why—I turned my face away, although it was not that the sunshine dazzled me, perchance it was in the effort to check the sudden leaping of my pulses set to a strange

and unknown tune ; when I looked again the eyes had gone. But always, when I dream, they're like two stars which, shining down, seem to touch my heart and set it to that strange music once again. And thus I know that somewhere, somehow, there lives a man who loves me, aye ! and could love me even if I were the lowliest born in France. But that is when I dream, Marie."

For answer Marie raised the listless fingers that hung over the side of the chair and kissed them with that unspoken sympathy which bound mistress and maid together. "The King of Navarre is a man ; they say he will march until his men drop, and then order music and dance alone," she said, hoping to divert Marguerite's mind.

She succeeded almost better than she anticipated.

The fighting light of pride sprang into the Princess's sorrowful eyes.

"I hope he may dance alone," she retorted ; "he may be a great marcher, but he seems in no hurry to visit me."

"He is playing tennis with Monsieur de Mouhy."

There was no mistaking the angry flush this time as Marguerite rose to her feet. "Playing tennis with Monsieur de Mouhy ! and they told me he was robing to meet me."

The door opened as she spoke, and both girls turned, expecting, perhaps, to see the object of their conversation, but it was only little Aurèle de Brie, rosy with the haste in which he had come.

"The King of Navarre waits upon Her Highness's

pleasure," he piped in his boyish treble, but with a shy smile towards Marie Belleforêt, who petted him oft-times, and made much of him, till his small head was wellnigh turned with so much attention from such a beauty.

"Tell the King I will receive him here," said Marguerite sharply, and the boy disappeared. Immediately the Princess hastened to an opposite door.

"Madame," cried Marie in some horror, "where are you going?—the King——" and she glanced from door to door.

Marguerite looked over her shoulder, laughing as she raised the tapestry. "I'm going to change my dress," she said merrily. "So he plays tennis while I wait for him. I'll teach this Gascon gentleman a lesson. He wears plain black when he comes a-courting, thinks only of his mother when he woos a wife. I shall be back shortly, Marie; you can entertain this budding Amadis." And she had gone even as Aurèle announced once more—

"King Henry of Navarre."

Marie stepped back into the centre of the room, flushed and embarrassed, to encounter a youth dressed in an old rusty black riding-habit, who came forward with alacrity, leaving his companion—very evidently a Huguenot, Marie thought, from his sombre dress and grave face—on the threshold. It was not difficult to recognize the King of Navarre; for, although but nineteen years of age, this monarch was possessed of a very striking personality. Tall, slight, with a trick of carry-

ing his head slightly on one side, an aquiline nose, curling chin, and piercing grey eye, which knew well how to command and to laugh, here was, as Marie herself had said, one who was essentially a man—a king he had yet to prove himself.

With but one fleeting glance towards the still swaying tapestry he advanced to Marie's side, seizing her hand with lover-like ardour, whilst his grey eyes looked keenly into her flushing face. "Your devoted servant, fair Princess," he exclaimed, very heartily.

Mademoiselle Belleforêt was overcome with confusion.

"Your Majesty," she stammered, with crimson cheeks. "Sire, I am not the Princess." And she looked despairingly towards the tapestry, hoping that Marguerite, repenting of her purpose, would reappear.

Henry followed her glance, though he quickly brought back his gaze to her face.

"I'll not believe it," he replied gaily. "Was I not told I went to woo the fairest maid in France? Come, kiss me, sweetheart."

But the girl backed hastily behind one of the carved chairs, curtseying as she retired.

"The Princess will . . . will join you shortly, Sire," she said primly, but there was a sparkle of invitation in the corner of the partially-veiled blue eyes.

Henry laughed, advancing. "She need not hurry," quoth he, "when she leaves so fair a substitute. What is your name, child?"

"Marie Belleforêt, Sire."

"A very pretty name, too, Marie," responded the young King, who had again reached her side. "I christen it," and, with an unexpected movement, he slipped his arm round the girl's waist and kissed her on the lips.

Again Marie crimsoned, but the laughter, unmistakable now in her dancing eyes, spoke less of outraged prudery than of enjoyment at the unexpected little passage-of-arms. Yet, with a glance towards the tapestry, her words were demureness itself.

"Oh, Sire, you must not."

Henry raised his eyebrows in innocent surprise. "What, are my lips so rough, or is kissing out of fashion?"

Marie curtsied. "Sire, it is wrong," she murmured.

At this Henry laughed aloud. "Wrong! Never believe it, pretty one, unless I tell you so. I've tried it, and I know."

Marie's eyes were opened wide in childlike surprise. "But, Sire, you are a Huguenot," she cried, and let a side glance fall on the erect and rigid figure of de Mouhy, whose stern, handsome features had already attracted her.

"A Huguenot? Yes!" laughed Henry, "but not in love, Marie. There is no heresy in love, but to be old and ugly," and he stooped once more to the level of her red, pouting lips. But this time a white hand was laid against his mouth, and blue eyes defied grey, as Marie replied, "Must I tell Your Majesty he is ugly?"

Henry straightened himself instantly, though his eyes still laughed.

"A hit, Marie, a hit!" he cried. "But spare me the truth. It is almost the only thing in which the Court remembers I am a King. There, I'll not kiss you, Marie."

The merry raillery in her eyes almost made him repent his promise as Mademoiselle Belleforêt curtsied afresh.

"And I'll not say you're ugly, Sire," she whispered roguishly. "Your Highness saves me a falsehood from confession when I meet Father Manson."

"You flatter, child. Must you confess the kiss?"

"Nay," she replied, primly pursing her mouth, "that is on Your Majesty's conscience, not mine."

"A ready tongue, Marie. Yet I thought it was on your lips."

"Sire, your generosity has already forgotten it."

"As you will, Marie; I've forgotten it." He glanced admiringly at the dainty figure in its rose-coloured satin with flower-face set in an aureole of golden curls, and again stepped forward, "Though, faith," he cried, "I'd like to refresh my memory."

Yet, even as he bent, she had escaped him, flitting across the room like some gay-winged butterfly, with Henry in pursuit and de Mouhy frowning in the doorway.

"What a prim little rosebud to find at Court," laughed Henry. "They did not tell me that I should find such amongst the famous Flying Squadron. If

your mistress had but your modesty and half your wit, I had not been so long a-coming, sweetheart. There, you need not fly; I am content with the memory which should be forgotten. But, tell me, what is the Princess doing?"

"Sire, she is attiring herself."

Henry flung himself into a chair yawning.

"So we poor countrymen are to be dazzled! Is her robe to take up half the room? If so, devil a kiss I'll get from her. Well! perhaps I'll not be sorry. However, you may join her, Marie." And, tilting his shabby hat over his eyes, he yawned again, as though preparing for sleep.

Marie Belleforêt was laughing as she left the apartment.

CHAPTER VI

A BOOR FROM GASCONY

"SIRE!"

There was unmistakable reproach in de Mouhy's voice, as he stood by his master's side.

Henry of Navarre pushed back his hat and smiled.

"A counsellor! I see it in your eyes, de Mouhy. Well, I am at leisure," and he folded his arms across his breast lazily.

But de Mouhy was in no mood for jesting.

"Sire," he repeated, "is this wise? We are surrounded by enemies. Will you force the Princess into their ranks?"

"Morbieu! No, I came to marry her," laughed Henry, as though the jest pleased him.

"And you start by kissing her maid!"

"A very good start, too! She's pretty. Wouldn't you have kissed her, oh, most sober of counsellors, had the chance come your way?"

"You mistake her for the mistress."

"Mistake? Nonsense, man! The Princess kept us waiting to flout us. Mistake? I know her every feature. What thought you of our reception?"

"The King was gracious, and the courtiers smiled."

"A whited sepulchre with bones inside. But the bones rattled. Did you hear the song which our gay Parisians sang as we rode along? A charming funeral dirge for the Huguenots. Do you remember our adventure of last night? We had a peep inside the sepulchre then. I would we had visited that garden of the Abbot's. 'Tis the first time that a pair of fine eyes cheated me of my purpose. You smile, de Mouhy? Yet I am in earnest. A word from cousin Charles and our throats would be cut to the pealing of marriage bells. Do you think I am fooled? Why, man, 'tis but a child's game of see-saw, with Navarre at one end and Guise at the other. Charles hates the Huguenots and fears the Guise. That's the situation."

"Then why, Sire, did you trust yourself here? Every moment is dangerous."

"A man may die but once, and there are precipices in Béarn. I came here because I love the danger, to pit my head against Catherine's, and—to be frank, de Mouhy, I am in love."

"And you come to marry Marguerite?"

"Because, my dear old slow-head, I am in love with Marguerite."

"You've never seen her since she was a child at Blois."

"When she pulled my hair. Pardi! she had spirit and beauty even then. But she has blossomed since. François Clouet sent me her picture; I used to look at it for hours, till the eyes grew soft and the blush reddened on the cheek. But it couldn't speak, de Mouhy,

so I went all the way from Gascony to hear her voice."

"From Gascony, Sire?"

"Yes. I was missing for a month—on a hunting expedition, 'twas said. I went to Paris, I saw her for a minute, the sunlight in her hair, the shadow deep in her eyes, and I heard her laugh, de Mouhy, just once."

"And you love her?"

"In the morning, and in the evening, when I wake, and when I sleep."

"But she is a Valois."

"I know. But, though Charles is a mad man, Anjou a fop, and Alençon a weakling, Marguerite is a Marguerite indeed—a white star with a heart of gold."

"And so you woo her in an old riding-habit, and start by keeping her waiting?"

"Ventre Ste. Gris! man, you're all right in a battle, but Heaven help you as a courtier! She has been surfeited with praises. Is she to be won by compliment? No, no! She thinks us Gascons savages. I'll humour her."

"The maid will tell her you kissed her."

"There is no need. She saw it."

"Saw it?"

"Why, yes. She forgets that in the mountains we have the ears of a fox and the eyes of an eagle. I heard the tapestry rustle, I caught the glimpse of a face, and, whilst my pulses leapt for Marguerite, I kissed Marie."

"Jealousy is not love, Sire."

"No, but it comes before or after. I am afraid,

de Mouhy, you are so serious, in your case it will come after."

De Mouhy's handsome face flushed under the light tone of raillery.

"My wife will have no cause for jealousy," he said stiffly.

Henry laughed, that gay, characteristic laugh which seemed to draw nose and chin together, whilst he stretched his legs before him.

"No, man," he cried, "'tis you who will be jealous."

De Mouhy shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not understand women," he replied, "yet, Sire, I should not insult my mistress by wooing her in mourning, in my oldest raiment."

Henry yawned, taking his hat from his head and passing an idle finger through the broken rim.

"Our hat is somewhat rusty, I confess," he said reflectively, "and the rim a trifle broken. I doffed it so often as we rode through Paris. There was a saint at every corner."

"Your subjects would have grieved for you. It is a sin for a Huguenot to uncover before a graven image."

"It is a greater sin for a Gascon not to uncover before a lady, even if she be a saint. St. Agnes, St. Catherine, St. Genéviève—I love them all. But I confess that when I passed St. Anthony, I looked the other way. Come, man, don't be shocked, let's get back to tennis, since the Princess keeps us waiting."

"If we were wise, we should go to Béarn. You can

see the avalanche and the landslide—in Paris the peril is hidden.”

“Ventre Ste. Gris! You are a cheerful companion; you’ll become popular in Paris—at funerals—meantime——”

“Meantime, Sire, I must leave you. I would see Taillebois and get the latest tidings.”

And, bowing hastily, de Mouhy quitted the apartment, even as little Aurèle de Brie entered to announce the coming of the Princess Marguerite and her train.

In an instant Henry was on his feet, cramming his rusty hat tightly down over his black curls, as he turned away, apparently not noticing the entrance of the Princess and her ladies. Marguerite bit her lip, and turned impulsively to Marie Belleforêt, who was beside her.

“Listen, Marie,” she whispered, “I’ll teach this Gascon boor a lesson.” Then, motioning her ladies to remain behind, she advanced towards Henry, who was amusing himself by looking at some pictures with his back towards her. “Your servant, Your Majesty,” she said sharply, whilst her beautiful face coloured with angry vexation.

Henry wheeled round, stood staring in loutish fashion at the Princess, who was attired in pale blue and primrose-coloured satin, worn over an enormous farthingale, and then, in answer to her curtsy, placed his hand over his mouth and burst into uproarious laughter.

The Princess’s ladies stared in amazement. Was *this* the all-conquering Gascon lover? *This* the King

of Navarre? A mere country lout, who had not even the manners to uncover before a lady, and who laughed their mistress out of countenance by way of greeting! There were flutterings and whisperings in the background, whilst the Princess drew herself up indignantly—

“You are amused, Sire,” she observed coldly. “You do not laugh at us?”

“Pardi!” cried Henry, still convulsed with merriment. “I laugh because I must. My mother laughed when I first saw the light. I was born laughing, and I have laughed ever since. We all laugh at Nérac. When you get there, Margot, you’ll laugh, too.”

Marguerite tossed her small head proudly. “Then I trust my brother will keep us near his person,” she retorted. “He will not part with you, now he has got you.”

And there was meaning concealed beneath the flutter of her eyelids.

“He holds me dear,” quoth Henry, “and well I know it, Margot. Forgive me, fair coz, I laughed only because of Nérac. My poor palace is not so large as the Louvre. Scarcely, indeed, will my doors admit so much fashion.”

Marguerite smoothed the knot of ribbons at her breast complacently.

“Mine is the largest farthingale in Paris,” she replied, with all the frank ingeniousness of a spoilt child. “But tell me, are Pau and Nérac as small and wild as our courtiers say?”

Henry shrugged his shoulders

"Nérac is a bit wild, but it is my home. It hangs on the valley, and the mountains frown on it, and the keen winds sweep it clean. True, in the winter, when the ways are blocked with snow, the wolves howl in the streets, and the bears prowl by the door. But no Béarnais minds that."

"Methinks," observed Marguerite, with meaning hauteur, staring at the hat which Henry had not troubled to remove from his head, "that there are bears other-where than in the *streets* of Nérac when you are at home, cousin."

But Henry took no heed of the shaft.

"Sometimes only wolves," he continued. "You'll grow to laugh at it when you are a Béarnaise."

"*When*," whispered Marguerite, beneath her breath, whilst she exclaimed aloud, "The savages!"

"Did you not know?" asked Henry, once more affecting the airs of a country lout. "I thought they knew everything in Paris, and Margot most of all."

Marguerite turned aside with a gesture of contempt. "In Paris," she observed stiffly, "men know better than to wear a hat in the presence of a woman."

Henry stared, then burst again into one of his hearty peals of laughter.

"To think I had forgot it! In Béarn, we don't wear hats at all—no, nor boots neither." He flung himself once more into the largest and most comfortable chair the room contained, and proceeded to kick off his boots. "These hurt me plaguily," he added, looking

up innocently at the mortified Princess, "and give me corns. I've had a long ride—that's better. Come, now we can talk comfortably, and I will tell you of all you shall do when you are my wife. Oh! we'll have great days when we get back to Nérac. You shall not find it dull, Margot."

Marguerite's eyes brightened a little.

"Is it so full of pleasures?" she asked eagerly.

"Nothing but gaiety, from morn to night," replied Henry with enthusiasm. "Out of bed early, we greet the morning sun. Then we hunt. Then back to breakfast—milk, biscuits, and sour cheese, and then we hunt until dinner."

The Princess's lip curled. "Oh! you do have dinner," she murmured sarcastically.

Henry smacked his lips. "Aye, aye. Cheese, garlic, and a flask of Cahors wine. If we've killed aught in the chase, why, we eat that too."

Marguerite's face was turned away from the speaker, her voice low and constrained, as she asked. "And . . . after dinner?"

"Why, then we hunt. No napping in the afternoons at Nérac. Then home to supper, and tired and happy we steal off to bed."

A long pause,

"Do you do *naught* but hunt in Gascony?" demanded Marguerite at last.

"Ventre Ste. Gris!" laughed Henry. "The men swear and the women sometimes dance."

Marguerite turned swiftly to him, nodding her head

with determination. "Then I shall dance—if ever I get there—from sunset to sunrise."

"Not in Béarn. From sunrise to sunset, as often as you will, but candles are scarce in Béarn."

Marguerite drew a deep breath.

"And the winter evenings, when the night falls?"

"Why, then we sleep. We are a simple folk, so we sleep soundly."

"You do not promise much, i' faith," laughed Marguerite bitterly.

Henry rose to his feet. "No," said he, and looked her full in the eyes, "but I'll give you more. What say you, coz, are we to bill and coo because your brother makes us wed? Let's be good comrades. I'll not hate you, though you be my wife."

Marguerite smiled, yet did not withdraw her gaze from those keen, grey eyes.

"Nor I, you," she said frankly. "Though I hope you will not be my husband. Tell me coz, what think you of our Paris?"

Henry gave a gesture of indifference.

"Tell me first what Paris thinks of me," he replied.

"Paris is Catholic."

"And I am Huguenot."

"But the palaces, the churches, the Court, and—and, what think you of our women? Come, cousin, you have eyes, are they not beautiful?"

"I have seen one who is so beautiful that only Ronsard could praise her, and he not do her justice"

The colour rose softly to Marguerite's cheeks, as she read the message of his eyes.

"What is her name?" she murmured.

But already Henry had recovered himself, and returned to his assumed rôle.

"Her name," he said carelessly, "I have forgot—she is a maid of the palace."

The blush on Marguerite's cheek deepened to an angry flush as she stamped her tiny velvet-clad foot in vexation.

"Coz, I begin to think you're a fool."

Henry yawned.

"They said so in Béarn," he replied; "but you shall teach me better—you that are the wisest woman in France."

"You have heard something of Marguerite in your country?"

"Pardi! Yes; they told me so much that I was afraid you had worn out your eyes reading."

Marguerite smiled, stepping close to him, and with a movement of irresistible coquetry laid her hand on his sleeve, looking him straight in the face.

"Are they so dull and faded, Henry?" she murmured, and shot him a look which must have conquered St. Anthony himself.

Henry caught back his breath, his own eyes narrowing, whilst his cheeks paled with emotion.

"They are . . ." he stammered. "Ronsard was right . . . they are . . . they are. . ."

Slowly a smile parted her rosy lips, he could feel the

soft breath fanning his face. He would have given worlds to yield to the intoxication of the moment, yet—being the Béarnais—he did not yield.

With a laugh, somewhat unsteady, he stared back into those glowing depths. "I'm glad I didn't wager," he cried gaily. "They are not crooked, after all."

In an instant Marguerite's hand was withdrawn, and the eyes which had proved that they could melt with tenderness flashed with fire.

"Crooked! crooked!" she shrilled, in a sudden flare of passion. "You monster, how dare you?"

But Henry only chuckled the more loudly.

"I was right when I told de Mouhy that your voice was loud," he retorted.

But Marguerite's patience had reached the utmost limit.

"This is intolerable," she cried, stamping her foot. "Sire, let me pass."

But Henry barred her way, bowing.

"What! would you leave me—*before* we are married? Even in Paris that is not the fashion."

"I shall never wed you. Let the King, my brother, do his worst. I will never wed, save of my own good will."

"Nor shall you, coz," replied Henry, with a meaning smile. "But your goodwill shall be for me. I can see you already love me, sweetheart, and when I have wooed you a little longer, —"

Marguerite laughed bitterly. "Wooed me! Is this

how you would woo? Are there naught but brutes in Gascony?"

"The men in Gascony are what the women make them, Madame," replied Henry, and once more his eyes were on her face, "and there are no truer lovers in the world. Farewell, coz, you shall know me better yet."

As he spoke, he bowed, this time with more respect, and, without awaiting a reply, strode to the door.

Marguerite looked after him, her white brows knit in a little frown of perplexity. Surely never woman had so barbaric a lover, and yet—and yet—his eyes were true and brave. She could dream that they were the eyes of a king—even a lover—despite the contradictions of the man himself.

A paper fluttered to the ground, and lay, a small fragment of white, upon the rich carpet.

"You dropped something, Sire," said Marguerite softly, conscious, in spite of inward resentment, that she was glad of the excuse to stay him.

Henry started and turned, even as the Princess picked up the paper.

"Give it to me—nay, you must not read that," he exclaimed, in seeming alarm.

Oh, useless injunction to a daughter of Eve! Already Marguerite was unfolding the missive, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"But I will," she cried gleefully. "I'll warrant it is to your mistress. So, Sire, you, too, can love. See here! Pardi! it seems you can even write verses."

"Nay," replied Henry, stepping to her side. "*Give me the paper.*"

But Marguerite backed from him, putting the paper behind her, whilst her face was alight now with laughter and mischief—laughter and mischief mingled with a more subtle undercurrent. Was it pique, regret, or chagrin?

Her voice, however, was gay as she retorted, "Nay, I'll know her name. Confess it is your mistress you address thus?"

Henry laughed, and surely it were impossible for woman to tell whether love or mockery, tenderness or disdain, echoed in the sound.

"As you insist on reading it," he replied slowly, "it were useless to deny it."

With a pout, which rendered her more adorable than ever, Marguerite glanced at the paper—read—re-read, lifted a pair of black eyes for a lightning flash into the face so near now to her own—flushed—smiled—then read softly aloud—

"A thousand stars the nights unfold,
A thousand flowers are at my feet,
But mine the flower with heart of gold,
My splendid Marguerite."

The grey eyes seemed to smile as she looked again into their inscrutable depths.

"My splendid Marguerite," she whispered. "I . . . I didn't know. This is your writing?"

"Yes. We do write, even in Béarn."

"But . . . I . . . I don't quite understand."

She did not back now as he drew nearer—and they were alone, her ladies having long since retired. Yet the smile in the grey eyes was mirrored now in the black.

“People don’t understand everything, even in Paris,” said Henry, taking her hand.

The Princess’s head drooped.

“I have much to learn,” she murmured meekly. “Will you not teach me, coz? How does a man make love in Gascony?”

Henry’s voice had softened marvellously, as he replied—

“How does a Gascon love? Ah! when he does, then the whole world vanishes, and he sees ever and always naught but his lady’s face. I knew a boy in Gascony who fell in love with a fair lady’s picture. Day after day he gazed upon her face, made her his saint, said his prayers before her, until one day he longed to hear her voice. Mounting his horse, he rode both night and day, scarce sleeping, scarce eating, laughing at danger, hunger, and fatigue, until he came to Paris and looked upon his love. She was standing at her window, the sunshine in her hair, the shadow in her eyes, laughter on her lips, whilst all the joy of living gave beauty to her face.”

Marguerite’s eyes were liquid, for what maid hears a tale of love unmoved?

“And she was glad that he could love her so, and gave him all her heart?”

But Henry shook his head, sighing. “He did but

hear her laugh, and rode away. That laugh rings in his ears now."

"He should have spoken—he should not have robbed her of such love."

"Should he not? Ah, but her mother hated him, her brother sought his life."

"She would not have cared. Mother and brother—all must give way to love. What was her name?"

"Her name was Marguerite."

"She was Marguerite, too?"

Grey eyes looked deep into black and smiled again.

"Yes, she was Marguerite, too. She was a Princess of France. He should not have looked so high, and yet I see you pity him. Farewell, Mademoiselle." He turned at the last word, going slowly towards the door, and, for all his shabby raiment and bent head, one knew he was a king as he so went.

And Marguerite, in all the glory of her beauty and splendour, sighed, clenching and unclenching little hands, whilst the dimple deepened in her soft round cheek.

"Sire."

"Princess."

He was by her side again, yet she faltered, crimsoning as she spoke. "You were that boy; it was you who measured half the length of France to see your lady's face. Who loved and asked for nothing. Such love is rare at Court. I . . . I have waited long days to see your face again."

Long did they look into each other's eyes—those

children whom the age had forced into man and womanhood before their time, and somehow life was set in a rose-coloured glory for the moment.

"Oh, Sire!" she faltered, and made a movement forward.

A moment later and lips would have met lips in that first glad kiss, had not the door been flung hastily open and Marie Belleforêt entered. Both Henry and Marguerite turned, frowning at the interruption, but Marie dared not retire without giving her message.

"The Queen-Mother requests your presence at once, Madame. She awaits your coming."

It was more than a wrinkle of vexation which furrowed Marguerite's brow as she turned to obey a command she dared not ignore.

But Henry could smile in spite of chagrin. He had looked deep into black eyes and seen the dawning of a star.

CHAPTER VII

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY

HENRY slept and awoke. It was annoying to wake at such a moment, for he had been dreaming that he walked through a meadow of gay flowers beside a stream, and—with the ripple of water in his ears mingled with the glad songs of birds and the soft murmur of the summer breeze—he had looked into dark eyes, and, reading love in them, had laughed aloud and kissed Marguerite upon the lips.

Then he awoke and closed his eyes afresh to woo the vision back. But the vision came not, only a soft, rustling sound jarred on his senses, the sound that had awaked him. In the mountains of Béarn he had learnt to hear.

Lazily he opened his eyes again, drowsily watching the patch of moonlight which widened on the floor beyond the shadow of his canopied bed. Where no moonlight fell there was darkness.

Again that mysterious rustling. He was awake now, his senses tingling with the knowledge of danger. Should he call his gentlemen who slept without? Nay; Navarre could not write himself down coward for the stirring of a rat.

Yet rats are sometimes best slain.

Drawing his long rapier from beneath his pillow, he rose very softly from his couch. One leg was already touching the floor, when, from the darkness of the tapestries, a man stepped into the patch of moonlight, his finger to his lips.

"Hist," muttered the intruder, as Henry was about to shout to those without the door. "I am your friend. I, Cosmo Ruggieri. Cry, and your death warrant and mine are signed."

"Cosmo Ruggieri," muttered Henry, staring in amaze at the strange figure, and recognizing it as that of the man he had seen in the little room of the house in the Rue d'Averon.

"Cosmo Ruggieri, the Queen's poisoner."

But, with characteristic caution, he did not cry for help, though he still grasped his dagger.

"As you will," replied the astrologer; "but the friend of Henry of Navarre would be a better title."

Henry's nose and chin seemed to curl together in that strange smile of his which just now was all mockery.

"I think you know, my friend," said he, "that I have sworn your death. Are you mad, to venture here like this?"

Ruggieri looked steadily at the young man.

"You will not kill me," he replied. "You are young; you love, and you wish to live. It is true that I am alone and unarmed, that you can kill me now, this instant, with your dagger, or call to those without

to do the deed. Yet all I say is, strike, Sire, but in doing so you seal your own doom."

Henry gazed furiously into the dark, but placid face of the Italian, who stood still in the moonlight, his arms folded across his breast.

"My dead mother's soul calls for vengeance," he said sternly, and slipped to the floor, with the dagger clenched in his hand. But Ruggieri's glance did not waver.

"You wrong me, Sire. I did not kill your mother. It is said that I sent her death in a pair of perfumed gloves; but it is false. Would Jeanne d'Albret wear such things? You yourself know that perfume, like incense, was an abomination to her—a thing accursed."

"That is true," said Henry, and sat leaning against the bed, drumming bare heels on the ground.

"Look from this window, Sire," continued the astrologer. "Yonder in the moonlight lies the river. Its exhalations cause more death each year than poison in an age. Did your mother not warn you against Paris?"

"How came you to know that?"

"It was I who told her Paris was bad for you. But I was not thinking of your health."

"Why do you tell me this? What do you here with me?—you that serve the Medici."

"I serve the stars, whose messenger I am. Night after night I watch their quiet faces, and read their distant secrets. Catholic or Huguenot—differences of

a day—the silent stars care not—what they write remains.”

Henry bent forward eagerly. In spite of an instinctive aversion to this subtle Florentine, whose crimes were said to be too numerous and terrible to relate—he was interested.

“What have they writ?” he whispered.

Ruggieri smiled.

“One thing they spell clearly,” he said, “the Béarnais shall be King. Three sons of Catherine and then Navarre. Francis is dead, Charles reigns now, then Anjou, then—yourself, Henry of Navarre.”

Henry’s nose was drawn down in his inscrutable smile, but his eyes were bright.

“King, King!” he muttered. “Aye, so I am already—of a few houses and a wilderness!”

“Nay, you shall be a King without a peer in France; but the road is rough and broken—danger lurks by the way.”

Henry flung out his right arm as though grappling with some unseen foe.

“I was born on the flank of a precipice,” he cried softly, “and care not how difficult the road, how fierce the peril—if France be at the end.”

“Courage alone will never win the goal,” replied the Florentine. “You must have cunning, Sire.”

“Am I not a Gascon?”

“Aye, but you fight an Italian.”

Henry frowned. “And a woman,” he added. “But, tell me, what are these dangers, Ruggieri?”

"I see them yet but dimly, but first—beware of wine."

Henry laughed beneath his breath.

"I will," he replied. "I will be rid of it as quickly as I may."

Ruggieri looked at the mocking face, with its twisted smile and hawk-like eyes, and bowed gravely.

"You laugh, Sire, but the cup that cheers you to-day may bring you the great silence to-morrow. Beware of fire when the sun is still warm and the summer lingers."

For answer Henry stretched out a bronzed, muscular arm bared to the elbow.

"You see that scar, Ruggieri? A burnt child—I shall not forget."

"Sometimes the smoke is deadlier than the flame; and beware of the fourth Sunday in August."

Henry yawned. "Excellent advice," he said; "but I always beware of Sundays. It's a dull day with us Huguenots."

Ruggieri's hand was within his robe, Henry eyed him with suspicion, but there was no weapon in the out-stretched palm that the astrologer extended towards him.

In the clear, white rays of the moon, it seemed that a spot of fire blazed in the centre of the lean brown hand.

Henry glanced at it curiously.

"Will Your Majesty accept a gift from so humble a friend as the poor astrologer?" murmured Ruggieri softly.

Henry took the ring eagerly, holding it still in the moonlight.

"An opal! *Ventre Ste. Gris!* It is alive. See, it gleams with the fires of Etna."

"There is magic in it, Sire. It is blood-red now. Place it near poison, it grows green as grass. That stone is worth a throne."

"And you would part with it? You are more generous than a king."

Again the Florentine bowed. "I give it to make one—to win a King for a friend, and—in part—to show that I am not ungrateful."

"Ungrateful?"

Ruggieri's eyes flashed with a sudden tenderness.

"You and your friend saved my daughter, Sire—and Bianca is dear to me."

"Ah! I remember, a girl with a fine pair of eyes and a slender waist."

"My only child, Sire."

"The ewe lamb? Well, guard her more carefully next time, Ruggieri; there seem to be quite as many wolves prowling about your streets of Paris as there are at Nérac."

"Sire, you speak the truth. Paris is a dangerous place."

"For Huguenots in especial," laughed Henry, lying back against his pillows, and drawing the bed-clothes over him. "I thank you, Ruggieri, for your timely warnings—and the ring. I shall not tell the Queen-Mother of our little interview."

Ruggieri bowed, and, without replying, glided noiselessly back into the shadows whence he came. There was a faint sound of rustling tapestries, a yet fainter click as a panel was slipped back into place, and then silence.

"After all," was Henry's sleepy soliloquy, as he again closed his eyes to woo fresh dreams of Marguerite, "one may have gained more profit in saving Ruggieri's daughter than in learning the secret of the Abbot's garden. I wonder if the Florentine's magic could have helped discover that. I see that I must be cautious, if I want ever to take Marguerite home to Nérac."

This last was a pleasant enough thought to sleep on.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CARDINAL'S MESSENGER

ARTHUR DE MOUHY walked slowly back to the "Belle Étoile," the inn in which he had taken lodging, since already every available apartment of the Louvre was filled with Huguenot nobles who had ridden to Paris with the King of Navarre.

A stream of gaily dressed courtiers thronged the courtyards of the palace, whilst the great gates were almost blocked by those who hurried in and out, all intent on their own business, laughing, talking, even singing, as though the brightness of the summer sunshine were contagious. In the streets beyond, however, shadows fell, the crowd here was less gay, there was less laughter, too, and, though many sang, there rang an ominous note in the words which accompanied the merry tunes—

"Hang every heretic high,
Where the crows and pigeons pass !
Let the brood of Calvin die,
Long live the Mass."

The song, started in an undertone by an idler, who wore the black and white livery of Anjou, echoed down the long street, till it sounded like the dull roar of a

wave which, breaking vainly upon a rock, goes surging back with long-drawn sighs of rage into the great deep.

"Long live the Mass."

The last notes died away with a wailing hiss, as though those who sang caught back their breath to wait.

De Mouhy, vaguely conscious of the warning cry, smiled.

He was not awake, as he might have been, to listen to the note of threatening; the usually sombre Huguenot leader was dreaming, and, for the first time, perchance, in his life, those dreams were rose-coloured, with a vision of golden curls—more dazzling than the sunshine—and blue eyes, which had looked once into his with the clear trustfulness of a child and all the alluring coquetry of a woman.

The vision of blue eyes remained even when the rose-coloured lights had vanished, and it seemed to de Mouhy that Paris was no longer the gloomy sepulchre shadowed with sin and idolatry, such as he had pictured it before.

Fancy paints the angels with eyes of heaven's azure, and surely Mademoiselle Belleforêt was kith and kin with these.

So the stern-faced Huguenot smiled even as he listened to that dismal echo—

"Let the brood of Calvin die
Long live the Mass."

Yet he remembered it afterwards as he sat brooding in the dreary little chamber of the "Belle Étoile."

through whose high, narrow casement no sunbeams stole, so that the shadows fell chill, touching his heart.

"Long live the Mass."

Was Paris threatening where her King welcomed? De Mouhy's head sank between his hands. Suddenly a voice near broke into laughter, loud, raucous, triumphant. "Good," it cried, "excellent! We shall soon be rid of the whole traitor-brood. So you ride to Rome, de Boisseau?"

De Mouhy raised his head and rose softly to his feet, tiptoeing to the wall, and laying his ear against it.

It was evident that the voices came from the next room.

"Hist," muttered another voice; "the 'Belle Étoile' is not the place in which to discuss matters of state. Jean Mereac has ill guests beneath his roof. Only next door lodges that long-faced Calvinist, de Mouhy himself."

"De Mouhy," replied the first speaker. "Mort de ma vie! de Mouhy? The friend of the Béarnais? You were wise, my friend, to mention it. But will he not be playing bear-leader to his dainty Prince at the palace?"

"It is possible, but I will go and see."

The sound of a hastily pushed back chair followed, and de Mouhy glanced round his room anxiously. A press stood beneath the window. Into this he leapt, and had scarcely drawn the lid over him when he heard the door open and a voice call his name.

in his thick but honest head—the Religion and his master.

“Jacques,” exclaimed de Mouhy, “ah, where have you been?” He beckoned the boy within and closed the door; an idea had occurred to him.

Jacques’ brown eyes were wondering and a little startled.

“I, Monsieur, I went to see the King of France and his grand palace; but instead I saw only a great crowd of people who stared at me and scowled. It is not like Gascony, M’sieur, this Paris, and I do not think they love us, for ever they whispered, ‘À bas les Huguenots,’ and cursed when I appeared.”

“So, so,” replied his master impatiently. “But now, whom did you meet as you entered the ‘Belle Étoile’?”

The lad’s eyes brightened.

“Ah, Monsieur, they were two Messieurs in rich velvets, very gallant to look at, and, though my father says that fine raiment is an ungodly snare, I could not help wishing that you, Monsieur, could dress in . . .”

“Peste! lad, a truce to folly. Yet you observed them? Did you hear them speak?”

“Yes, Monsieur,” replied Jacques rather shamefacedly. “I lingered to watch them mount, though the steeds would not compare with Croisette, and——”

“Peace, boy! What said they? What said they?”

De Mouhy’s hazel eyes were alight with eagerness as he grasped Jacques’ shoulder, shaking it slightly in his impatience.

"Nay, Monsieur," was the perplexed answer, "'twas something of a packet which one of them must needs fetch from the hotel of the Cardinal—I forget the name, and then—then they agreed to meet, 'twas at an inn somewhere—yes, methinks it was somewhere on the outskirts of the Faubourg St. Germain."

"The name of the inn?" muttered de Mouhy in tones hoarse with excitement, "the name, fool?" Jacques stared. He was not accustomed to be thus addressed.

"Monsieur—I forget," he stammered. "'Twas at the moment of parting, and one cried to the other, 'At seven o'clock at the—at the——'"

"At the—a crown, Jacques, may assist thy addlepate. Come, try to remember. Our lives may hang on that short memory of yours."

Jacques rubbed his curly head, his face crimsoning under its bronze in his anxiety. But, as de Mouhy rose, flinging him aside with a gesture of despair, memory returned, in a flash.

"The 'Pomme d'Or,'" he cried joyously, "the 'Pomme d'Or.'"

In an instant de Mouhy's hand was over his mouth, though the man laughed at the boy's startled looks as he raised a warning finger. Steps on the stairs, and Dame Mereac's scolding tones relieved them.

"Good," whispered de Mouhy, beneath his breath. "You have earned your crown well, Jacques, but, take my advice, and keep the money for the purchasing of a new dagger; you will need it, lad, ere we reach Gascony."

And, leaving the boy staring in bewilderment at the coin he thrust into his hand, he hurried down the stairs, unconscious of a coquettish glance thrown in his direction by the innkeeper's pretty daughter, or of the scowl with which her father watched his departure.

CHAPTER IX

WHAT PASSED AT THE "POMME D'OR"

IT wanted ten minutes to the hour of seven, and the twilight already had begun to cast long, slanting shadows amongst the tall houses of the busy city.

There were shadows in plenty around the inn, which lay, as Jacques Marneau had said, on the outskirts of the Faubourg St. Germain, beyond the gates of Paris.

A flaunting signboard displayed a gilded apple of vast proportions, which the evening breeze swung hither and thither with a creaking sound.

The monotonous noise might have had an ominous warning for the man who slipped from the shadow of a narrow alley opposite and hastened boldly forward.

A dicer does not hesitate on the throw that is to spell fortune or ruin for him, and Arthur de Mouhy, swaggering it bravely towards the "Pomme d'Or," staked something more than fortune on his venture; therefore he went forward with confidence.

It is certain that the old mother who lived in the grey château amongst the far-off woods of Jurançon would have found it hard to recognize her grave and sober-suited son in the gallant clad so gorgeously in black and crimson, who, idly curling his moustachios

with the air of a courtier, demanded haughtily of the bowing host whether Monsieur de Boisseau had arrived.

"Yes, yes, Monsieur had arrived, he was above in a private apartment, awaiting the arrival of Monsieur—Monsieur——" Mine host hesitated, for caution was to be observed in the airing of names of guests to the "Pomme d'Or," in these days. But he of the crimson and black supplied the gap, "De Varais," he said carelessly, "De Varais. And Monsieur de Boisseau is above?"

"Permit me, Monsieur," gurgled the fat host obsequiously; but the anxious eye he cast in the direction of the kitchen was enough to show the observant that he was pondering the fate of the stewed soles which were to be served anon to these distinguished guests.

De Mouhy saw the glance, and, interpreting it, smiled. "No, no," he said, still with that air of supreme indifference. "I can find the way—the room on the right-hand side at the top of the stairs, I think you said?"

"To the left, Monsieur, if Monsieur will permit," murmured the host, who had not attempted before to describe the locality of the apartment. Again de Mouhy nodded, and, leaving the owner of the Pomme d'or to his stew, mounted the stairs rapidly.

It wanted five minutes to seven.

Monsieur de Boisseau was seated with his back to the door. When one dines at eleven, one is hungry enough by seven, and Monsieur de Boisseau was already regretting that he had asked de Varais to dine with

him; the smell of the stew, rising insidiously to his nostrils, was provokingly appetizing.

"Ah, ah," he cried, hearing a latch click behind him, and the sounds which told of one who entered the room, "it is well that you are in time, de Varais. I was in the devil of a hurry for supper, and was already beginning to anathematize our Henry for keeping you. How is he this evening? More drawn to Charles in the arms of brotherly love, I hope?"

"Of a certainty," quoth de Mouhy grimly, "the King of Navarre and the King of France are as brothers."

"Of Navarre! Mille diables! Of Navarre! 'Twas the Guise——"

But de Boisseau had already sprung to his feet with a louder imprecation, and had seen the figure in crimson and black standing in the doorway with naked blade in tightly clenched hand, and the face of an avenging angel.

"De Mouhy," he gasped, and whipped out his own sword, comprehending instantly what the situation portended. "Eavesdropper," he snarled, and leapt, as you may have seen a crouching wild cat spring upon some frightened forest creature till that moment all unconscious of its presence.

But, though de Mouhy fell back at the first onrush, he smiled grimly, for there was no time either for explanation or preamble since already the great clock of St. Etienne struck the hour of seven. So they fought, these two, backwards and forwards in that little room,

yet so silently that mine host, stirring the seasoning into the savoury pot with his own hands, and scolding his daughter all the time for imagined idleness, never heard a sound to cause him disquietude, nor dreamt that grim Death stood for sole witness in a bloody duel overhead.

It was not long—that duel—for Arthur de Mouhy had neither time nor mercy to spare for the envoy of Cardinal Pelvé, and, though, to begin with, de Boisseau slashed out wildly in contempt for a whining Huguenot, he had no opportunity to change his tactics, no chance for cry or curse, for, scarce had the last echo of the clock's stroke died away down the silent street than he fell, with de Mouhy's sword through his heart.

It seemed that they learnt how to fight as well as make love and sing psalms in Gascony.

De Mouhy wiped his sword and sheathed it, even as he looked down sternly, yet not without pity now, at the crumpled, helpless figure of the dead man. But there was no time even for reflection, for already the sound of horse-hoofs came ringing up the street.

Hastily he bent and tore open the primrose-coloured doublet, which was stained with widening splashes of crimson; but it was not to scan an ugly death wound that he looked, for the hand, trembling now slightly, in spite of its owner's iron nerve, searched rapidly in the lining of the doublet itself, till at last it drew forth a small packet.

It was sealed with the Cardinal's signet. The horse's hoofs had stopped without. "Morableu!" muttered

de Mouhy, and set his teeth in his lips, as he looked round the dimly lighted room.

Already he knew that to descend the stairs unobserved would be impossible. Men's voices raised above the ordinary pitch were heard in the parlour below. Desperation adds wisdom even to a slow intelligence, and de Mouhy was no fool. The window was not far from the ground; it was open. He had swung himself on to the ledge even as the thought struck him, and stooped, crouching there, looking this way then that for means of escape.

Death was coming up the stairs to greet him, as it had come a while back for de Boisseau—and it was death for more than himself.

It nerved him to remember that last, and he smiled grimly, as his wont was, whilst he noted the narrow ledge of masonry which wound round above him, skirting the roof of the inn.

It was not in vain that de Mouhy had hunted the deer amongst the wooded mountains of Béarn, or tracked the wolf home to his lair along the face of the precipice. His head was as steady as the hand which stretched up to the ledge above, and gripped it in a vice of iron.

Another moment, and he was swinging in mid-air, clinging, as it were, against the sheer wall of the inn, whilst he gathered his whole strength together for that mighty effort which he prayed might land him safely on the roof above. An instant's pause, a fleeting prayer, and, lo, he lay panting amongst the chimneys on the

roof of the "Pomme d'Or," thanking heaven that he had been born a mountaineer.

Yet, even now, peril was imminent, for, listening intently, he could catch the sudden uproar of voices in that room from which he had come, and knew that de Boisseau's body had been found.

Wriggling along on his stomach, he succeeded in sheltering himself more securely behind the chimney stacks whilst he looked anxiously round for further means of escape.

It was too dark for passers-by in the street below to see him easily, but still he was careful not to allow his body to be silhouetted against the skyline. And, as he peered and pondered, his heart hammering madly in his breast with the excitement of the moment, the sound of one of Marot's Psalms sung in a rich but subdued voice reached him as he lay. Eagerly de Mouhy raised himself on his elbow, and strained his eyes in the direction of the sound.

It evidently came from the house next to the inn, and, in good time, de Mouhy spied an open window almost facing his lair.

If risk there were it was worth running, since a trap door might lead to the roof, and his searchers would probably think of looking there, even if they could scarcely credit his reaching the spot from the room below. Therefore he crept forward, scrambling from this point to that till he could catch at an overhanging eave of the house beyond. It needed either a cat or a Gascon to swing securely with such a footing, but

the Pyrenees had chasms more terrible than these, and de Mouhy, as his feet clung at first vainly for hold, was reminded how he had tracked a fox to its den only to find that the mountain path behind had collapsed, leaving him, it appeared, to death amongst grey precipices. He had escaped that peril, and surely he would do the same now. Even with the thought his toes touched the sill below. The window was still open, but the song had stopped, and, behold! two blades, naked and gleaming, faced him as he dropped, cat-like, in a bunch within the room.

A faint scream, an oath, and one sword-point touched the crimson silk of his pourpoint.

Then, as he rose, blinking like an owl in the light, and with a deep breath for perils past and perils yet to come, a hearty voice cried his name.

"De Mouhy! Ma foi! De Goizet, it is de Mouhy himself, though what he wants in the devil's colours I cannot guess."

It was Taillebois—the very man he would fain have sought.

Understanding had returned to the man who had run such a race with death. He was conscious that, beside Taillebois, there were two others present in that room. A lady whose hair had long since grown silvered, and a grey-bearded man—he whose sword had touched his breast. Instinctively de Mouhy extended the packet to Monsieur de Taillebois.

"From the Cardinal Pelvé to the Cardinal of Lorraine," said he. "Methinks it concerns us."

Taillebois took the packet, raising his eyebrows as he saw the ominous splash of crimson on the white parchment.

All were silent, however, as he cut the morsel of silk which bound the outer covering, and, quickly unfolding the paper within, read first to himself, then aloud, whilst his face grew grim over the words—

“At last we have them in a trap; we only need the King’s consent, and not a Huguenot will wake in Paris. Marguerite hates this marriage, but for the cause she will consent.”

A silence followed that reading. It was as though, through the clash of wedding bells, one heard the ominous sound of the passing bell. A death knell to the Huguenots.

It was Taillebois who spoke first. “We are betrayed,” he said.

De Mouhy passed a trembling hand across his brow. “It is not too late,” he muttered; “at least we can save Henry.”

“To warn our comrades would be but to hasten the stroke,” said Monsieur de Goizet, who stood by his wife’s side, his arm slipped round her waist.

“We cannot warn them,” muttered Taillebois, and, brave man though he was, there was a sob in his throat at the words. “The first signal of alarm would also be the signal for the massacre. But, Henry”—his eyes sought de Mouhy’s—“we must save *him*.”

“Aye,” said de Mouhy simply, “we must save the King—if he will be saved.”

"Pardi, man! You have but to show the letter; Henry is too young to wish to die."

"It is true—and yet—well, I know not. See, my friend, there shall be no delay. I will go at once; only first I would fain change this gaudy raiment. My crimson and black would prove my death, did I venture out in them. The host of the 'Pomme d'Or' was more likely to note my colour than my face."

A change of dress was quickly effected, and, whilst Taillebois promised to await in the Rue Etienne close to the Louvre with some half-dozen comrades to accompany Henry in his flight, de Mouhy hastened to acquaint his royal master of his danger and their plan of escape.

Henry was alone in one of the royal apartments of the Louvre. His face was flushed, and his grey eyes musing, for had not Marguerite but now left him? Marguerite—his white flower, which had already opened more than one shy petal to display to his eager gaze the heart of gold beneath.

So the young King dreamt, and his dreams were sweet with the joy of youth and love, forgetful for the moment of the dangers which his shrewd sense had taught him to apprise seriously enough. Yet one cannot always be watchful, and for the moment Henry gave himself up to dreams.

De Mouhy's hasty entrance brought him back to the present, and, being little pleased at such a descent from poetry to prose, he frowned. "What is it,

de Mouhy?" he asked testily. "Ventre Ste. Gris, man! I never saw you look so pale."

"Sire, Sire," cried the young Huguenot in an eager undertone, glancing cautiously round the apartment, with its rich tapestry hangings. "We must come at once. Quick; there is not a moment to lose."

Henry's nose and lips curled together in his habitual smile, but his grey eyes were curious.

"What's the matter, then? Is the plague broke out?"

De Mouhy laughed bitterly as he held out the Cardinal's letter.

"Aye, Sire," he retorted, "one that will choose its victims, one that the Mass alone will cure. Read that."

For answer Henry turned the parchment slowly round in his hand.

"Who is it from?" he asked.

"From Cardinal Pelvé to the Cardinal of Lorraine, our worst enemy. Read, Sire, read. Every moment is precious."

"So it would seem, de Mouhy," laughed Henry—but he read.

It did not take long to scan those brief contents, yet long enough to change a laughing, mocking face into that of a man, stern and set with horror.

"Then I was right, de Mouhy," muttered the young King hoarsely. "The marriage was a snare, a snare for me, and a snare for all my brethren. This is Catherine's work."

He sprang up as he spoke, hastily pacing the room the paper crushed between his fingers.

"My God! Is Margot in it? Does she know?"

De Mouhy stood, rigid, in the doorway, his arm-folded across his breast.

"The Cardinal writes as though she readily consents to act as lure, Sire," he replied coldly.

Henry's face flushed.

"Consent! Consent!" he muttered. "Consent to what? Would she give herself to lure us all to ruin? I'll not believe it, de Mouhy. She looked into my eyes with the glance of a child. I'll not believe it. Heaven's innocence was in those eyes, I swear it."

"What matters it?" said de Mouhy impatiently. "You have read the letter, Sire. It is time to go. Taillebois and a half-dozen stout blades are waiting with fresh horses. Come, Sire."

"And my friends? Coligny, 'Foucauld . . ."

"We can leave them warning."

"The moment I go the Catholics will be alarmed; there will be a massacre, and I shall have given the signal for the death of my friends."

"They would die to save you, Sire, and your death cannot help them. Quick, I pray you. Taillebois waits our coming in the Rue Etienne. Come, Sire."

"Nay, I will not leave my friends."

"You will be killed."

"I care not. It is better to die once, than to live fearing death."

"Sire, Sire, I implore you."

But Henry did not note the beseeching ring in his faithful soldier's voice. He had stooped and picked up a tiny lace handkerchief.

"Does she know? Does she know?" he whispered, and pressed it to his lips.

"Come, Sire," cried de Mouhy, tears in his eyes as he supplicated.

But the subtle perfume of that dainty scrap of cambric had already set Henry's heart throbbing.

"Does she know? Does she know? Ventre Ste. Gris! I'll not believe it. My Marguerite. No, de Mouhy, I stay."

And there was triumph in the King's voice.

CHAPTER X

THE LOVE PHILTRE

THE marriage of Henry of Navarre with Marguerite de Valois was a thing accomplished.

Paris had witnessed the gorgeous pageant with gloomy eyes, and muttered curses on the bridegroom, even as it gaped in wonder at the loveliness of the bride.

They loved the Huguenots, these gay Parisians, as little as they had a month ago, but yet the Huguenots stayed, aye! and were content to stay, blind to scowling faces, deaf to muttered imprecations, sunning themselves in the King's smile, trusting in the King's word. And it seemed that their trust was not given in vain.

The pearl of France had become the bride of their young leader. Huguenot and Catholic were bound together by the troth of happy lovers. So thought the Huguenots—but there were some who smiled—amongst them the bride's mother—and others who watched,—and amongst them the gay and debonair bridegroom himself, who appeared to find Paris, marriage, even the Medici herself, vastly amusing.

Thus Henry laughed and Catherine plotted, Charles

wavered and the Duc de Guise cursed, whilst the Paris mob sang and the Huguenots stopped their ears.

They were singing now, those Parisians, in spite of the sweltering heat of the August day, and their song was as ominous as it had been a month before.

"Grind the sword and melt the lead,
Grind the sword and count the dead,
The Huguenots shall die."

The sounds floated up through the windows of the Palace of the Louvre. They reached the ears of two who sat alone in one of the royal apartments. And, as she listened, the Queen-Mother smiled. Not so the Guise; his handsome face was clouded, and more grimly saturnine than ever. Here was a volcano ready for eruption, and the smouldering fires gleamed in his dark eyes.

"Well, Madame," he said impatiently, "I have waited, waited for a month, and with what result? The marriage is accomplished, and the Huguenots more firmly established than ever; the King grows fonder of them every day."

"Appears to grow fonder of them, Monsieur le Duc."

"Bah! You hear the people? Paris is getting out of hand at our festivities, the monks preach treason in the streets, the Huguenots laugh at our saints and sing their godless psalms outside our churches. Let the King look to it; he is half suspected of heresy himself."

Catherine laid her hand soothingly on the young nobleman's arm.

"Nay, good Guise," she murmured, "give me to-

night. If by to-night Navarre be not stricken in the dust I place myself in your hands."

Guise frowned. "And see, Madame," he said sternly, "that you do not trifle with me. The Huguenots say freely you dare not touch Navarre, lest the Guise should be too great."

Catherine's brow darkened as she rose with stately dignity.

"You are too arrogant, Monsieur le Duc, the King has no rival. But the Huguenots shall die. When Ruggieri foretold that Henry of Navarre should be King, he pronounced his death."

"An old man's tale," retorted Guise hotly, as he also rose. "There are thirty thousand astrologers in France, and each says what he wills. But my dead father's blood still calls for vengeance, and Coligny shall die to-morrow, if I kill him with my own hands; and there is no King in France, no, nor in the world, shall stop me. If the King is afraid, I will raise Paris myself. I am the Guise! Think over it well, Madame. I take my leave," and, bowing with studied insolence, he left the room.

For long Catherine sat pondering after the Duke had left her. It was true that Charles had proved himself strangely unmanageable with regard to her wishes concerning the Huguenots. The young King of Navarre with his merry humour and keen love of sport, had appealed strongly to the weak-minded monarch, who clung to him and to de Rochefoucauld as though they were his dearest friends, whilst he only too plainly

showed his hatred and distrust of his brother, the Duc d'Anjou, and the Guise. Yes, there was but one way of accomplishing her ends, Catherine mused, and this was by arousing Charles's suspicions concerning the ambitions of the Béarnais, and, as she mused, the Queen-mother smiled.

"I am afraid of him," she whispered to herself. "Sapristi! I am afraid, that mocking laugh of his daunts me. He always laughs. Yet, surely to-night he will not escape; when Charles sees his form in the mirror he will not spare him. His mad passion will never endure the sight of that vision, of the Béarnais crowned with the crown of France." Even as she spoke the door opened, and a page announced the coming of the Queen of Navarre. Catherine smiled, holding out her hand to her young daughter.

"Ah, Margot," she said, in her softest tones, "I have wanted to see you, child."

Marguerite, who looked pale and tired, curtsied low, as she replied coldly, "I am always in the Palace, Madame."

"Aye, but these dances, pageants, and masques so fill up the day that the hours seem too few. Tell me, child, are you happy?"

Marguerite's face was averted as she replied, "Why do you ask, Madame?"

Catherine's sigh was one of maternal tenderness.

"Because my heart misgives me, Margot," she said gently. "You look pale and troubled. Were we right to force you into this marriage?"

The sympathy and seeming anxiety in her mother's voice broke down the girl's reserve. "Oh, mother, mother!" she cried, flinging herself impulsively at her mother's feet, "what have I done that I should be so unhappy?"

Softly her mother stroked the dark head which lay in her lap.

"There, there, child," she murmured, "don't agitate yourself! What's done, cannot be undone!"

'If he only loved me, mother.'

"Perhaps he does. You are excited, little one, and make too much of trifles."

"Trifles! Ah, mother, if I were the lowliest woman in France he should not have flouted me thus. To tell me he had traversed France alone to hear me say one word, and then to leave me on my wedding-night! Oh, that night! The maids nudged each other, and laughed as their eyes grew wide with wonder, while I sat dry-eyed and amazed, weary and heart-sick until the dawn crept in. Oh, the shame of such scorn! Do you wonder, mother, that I hate him? I hate him!"

"The marriage must be annulled."

Marguerite dashed aside her tears.

"I thought for a moment that I was to be so happy, that I, a Princess, was to be loved as a woman, just for what I am. And he fooled me. If I could only make him feel as I have felt, if I could only have him at my feet for one short minute, to spurn him as I have been spurned!"

Catherine's eyes grew suddenly bright with curiosity,

as she looked into the fair, troubled face, upraised to hers.

"Why, child," she said slowly, "you are jealous, you have loved the man."

Marguerite's hands clenched.

"I hate him!" she whispered.

"Yet you want him to love you?"

"Yes. I—I want him to love me. I want—I want to humiliate him, as I have been humiliated,"

Catherine's white taper fingers closed over the small, clenched fist.

"And you shall," she said.

"There is not a lady at Court he admires less than me," sobbed Marguerite.

Her mother smiled.

"He shall never look at them again after you have given him this," she murmured, and drew from the bosom of her gown the tiny phial given her by Cosmo Ruggieri.

Marguerite took it, looking curiously at the contents, as she held it up to the light.

"Why, it is empty!" she cried.

"Nay, but it is as clear as crystal," said her mother. "It is a love potion. Ruggieri prepared it for me. It never fails. It will make him true to death."

Marguerite smiled through her tears, as she turned the stopper.

"May I taste it, mother?" she asked.

But Catherine checked her hastily. "Stay, you must not open it," she cried, "or it will lose its virtue."

Ask your husband to toast you, put it in his wine, and—you will never complain of him again."

"I will, mother."

"But let it not leave your hand, child. It works only for the giver."

Marguerite's sigh was one of pure content.

"Trust me, mother. If he but loves me, I believe I shall forget I have ever been unhappy."

Catherine smiled.

"That is well, child. But come, look your loveliest, and don your richest robes, the dance begins shortly and Ruggieri is to show us the future."

Involuntarily Marguerite shuddered.

"Ruggieri!" she whispered. "I am afraid of him, but if he makes Henry love me I shall forget it. Good-bye, Madame. I shall be gay now." And, kissing her mother's hand gratefully, she left the apartment, humming lightly beneath her breath.

And Catherine's brow was clearer than when the Guise left her.

"At least," she murmured, "the Béarnais will never reign in France."

CHAPTER XI

THE PRICE OF A KISS

MARIE BELLEFORÊT stood before Queen Catherine, her piquant, pretty little face somewhat flushed and uneasy, her fingers toying nervously with the ribbon about her neck.

Catherine's dark eyes were cold and expressionless, yet their gaze seemed to exert the same mesmeric influence as the touch of her hand possessed. "Well, child, what have you to tell me?" she asked, in that subtly suave voice of hers.

"Nothing, Madame."

The girl's lids were lowered. But rosy lips were set firm in a line of determination.

"Nothing! nothing!" replied the Queen-Mother sharply. "Have all my women lost their heads?"

White lids flickered as though fighting against a spell.

"The King of Navarre came with his gentlemen in the afternoon as usual," murmured Mademoiselle Belleforêt. "But he only laughed, yawned, and then went away again."

"And you have no suspicion as to why he behaves so strangely?"

"None, Madame."

Catherine's brows contracted.

"You are stupid, girl."

The entrance of Arthur de Mouhy set a stop on their conversation, but Catherine's bright eyes had seen the deepening flush on Marie's cheek, and she drew her to her side.

"'Tis the dull fool, Henry's shadow," she whispered. "See if he knows aught. Task him with his master's infidelity. I shall expect news when I see you again, little one."

Marie curtseyed, watching the stately figure in its dark satin gown move across the room with that slow, gliding step peculiar to it.

When the door had closed behind Catherine, she gave a sigh of relief, and turned, with a coquettish smile, towards de Mouhy. She did not find this grave Huguenot gentleman so embarrassing as might have appeared probable, for a woman knows by instinct when she is loved, and Marie was somehow perfectly aware that Monsieur de Mouhy saw blue eyes in his dreams. Yet her curtsey was as demure as his bow.

"Monsieur de Mouhy!" she murmured with a little sigh.

"Mademoiselle."

"Do you never smile?"

De Mouhy looked very seriously into the sparkling eyes, and twisted his hat nervously in his hand.

Marie shrugged her shoulders with a little pout.

"I vow you are very dull, sir," she remarked. "Do you know you are alone with a very charming woman?"

Whilst the unfortunate young soldier was racking his brains for a compliment, the laughing girl went on, "And do you always wear these melancholy suits?"

De Mouhy looked still grimmer.

"Once I wore one of a gay fashion, Mademoiselle," he said.

Marie opened her blue eyes wide.

"Nay, truly, I would I had seen you! And the colours? Crimson and silver would suit you, I think."

"They were crimson and black."

"Oh! The Huguenots have no taste. You must take care who you marry, Monsieur de Mouhy, or you will be dowdy to the end of your life. Crimson and black! That reminds me. De Varais is in an ill humour. You know de Varais, Monsieur?"

"Aye, Mademoiselle, I know him."

A dimple danced in a pink cheek.

"And do not like him. Fie! Monsieur. I thought the Huguenots were so charitable. But this Monsieur de Varais is in an abominable mood. I asked him why, and he told me a tale. Pardi! all the Court knows it by now. Monsieur Boisseau, the envoy of Cardinal Pelvé was found dead in the inn of the 'Pomme d'Or,' in the Faubourg St. Germain. Monsieur de Varais was to have supped with him, but a few minutes before his arrival came a gentleman in crimson and black who named himself de Varais. When the real de Varais went upstairs he found the room empty, de Boisseau dead with a sword point through his heart, and a strong smell of brimstone pervading the whole place."

De Mouhy's smile was grim.

"And the murderer?" he questioned.

"Vanished. Of course, it was the devil himself. It must have been. Dressed in crimson and black, and with the power of melting into thin air! There was no possibility for a mere man to have escaped."

"Did he leave a claw behind him? The story is not in the favour of Catholic envoys, Mademoiselle."

"You are actually smiling, Monsieur, and when you do that you are not really so ugly. But I do not think I should boast, if I were you, that you have worn crimson and black. They are the devil's colours. Now supposing you had said blue. . . ." Her head was a little on one side, as she looked up at him, and de Mouhy felt the blood leaping in his veins.

Ah! blue eyes are dangerous with the sunlight in them.

"Blue," murmured Marie reflectively, as she unwound the ribbon from her neck, and flung it about his, "and this rosette in your hat. Ah! yes, and a sash, perhaps. Why, now, Monsieur, you look quite a man."

A gleam of amusement shone in the dark face bent a little lower to the level of her fair one.

"May I move?" he asked.

"One moment. Your moustachioes should be curled,—so—you are already a courtier—a gallant! Monsieur, I make you my compliments. But stay—some scent will complete the illusion—and, even Monsieur de Varais will not recognize you."

But de Mouhy raised his hands.

"No, no, Mademoiselle, I cannot use scent."

"Why not? It is some of the Duc d'Anjou's. René Bianchi made it specially for him."

"If it were made by the Queen herself, I'd not make a civet cat of myself. I'm a plain soldier, Mademoiselle, and you must take me for what I am."

But Marie only laughed the more saucily.

"I will," she declared, "and I'll make you what I like," and she sprinkled him vigorously with the perfume.

De Mouhy sighed—and submitted.

"Now smile, Monsieur," commanded his tormentor, with an adorable dimple hovering in her cheek. "And you shall dance with me to-night."

"I don't dance."

"Then you shall hold my hand, while Ruggieri shows us the future in the mirror. But for dancing—I must teach you. You will never be a Court gallant till you have learnt."

"I am a Huguenot soldier, Mademoiselle."

"Monsieur de Rochefoucauld is both, and you know how successful he is. Now try, Monsieur, and for reward I will buy you a comfit box, and you shall offer me the comfits."

As she spoke she drew aside her skirts sufficiently to display two dainty little feet clad in blue velvet.

"Come, Monsieur," she cried, "you see? Tra-la-la, tra-la-la—point your toes so."

Half laughing, half confused de Mouhy strove to enter into the spirit of the game, but his eyes being

fixed more on the merry face than on the dancing feet of his instructress, he soon over-balanced himself.

Marie laughed irresistibly as he picked himself up, somewhat ruefully, for a man does not care to make himself ridiculous in his mistress's eyes.

"I don't see why you laugh," he muttered. "It's a very serious business."

"Well, once more, Monsieur, then I must go back and tell the Queen-Mother all you have told me of your master."

"But I haven't told you anything."

"And you mustn't. Hush! Then I shall not have to hide anything from Catherine, but if I know, I daren't deceive her, or I should die suddenly. Heigho! or go into a convent—which would be worse. La, Monsieur, don't look so serious, be like your master. Laugh, man, laugh!"

"When Henry laughs something is going to happen."

"Something is always going to happen, Monsieur Sour-face. Just now you are going to dance with me."

"I can't dance, but I can follow my master's example in more than laughing."

Blue eyes looked up curiously.

"Nay—tell me—I know not what the King of Navarre does in Paris, except laugh."

"Sometimes he kisses."

As he spoke de Mouhy bent and kissed rosy lips ere they could flout him.

"Monsieur!"

Released at last, the rebuke followed with prettily assumed heat, but blue eyes were laughing.

So engrossing was the pastime that neither heard the door open till a mocking voice struck on their ears.

"Morbleu! Monsieur, I make you my felicitations!" De Mouhy turned towards the speaker, whilst Marie, with a little cry, slipped from her lover's arms.

It was Antoine de Varais, who stood watching them, and his face was not that of an angel. Yet he said no more, but stood twisting the lid of his jewelled comfit box in affectation of his master, the Guise.

Not an ill-looking fellow, this de Varais, but with an ugly line between his brows, which showed purple when he was in bad humour. It was purple now.

"The air of Paris agrees with you, Monsieur?" he said, sauntering carelessly into the room, with a bow to Marie, who stood looking at him with an expression betwixt displeasure and fear.

De Mouhy smiled grimly.

"Most excellently, Monsieur," he retorted. "I shall hope to make a long stay."

"Indeed? I thought you looked somewhat pale."

"When, Monsieur?"

"When you looked just now at my sword."

"You mistake, Monsieur. I was but wondering if it grew rusty in its sheath."

"I would prove it to you, if you liked, though it is scarcely worth my while."

"I fail to comprehend you, Monsieur."

"One does not draw one's sword to slay the dog that barks too noisily at one's heels. One chastises it."

"It is the brave man who points his weapon at a defenceless adversary."

"Monsieur!"

"Monsieur de Varais has the Guise behind him."

"Monsieur—on guard!"

But Marie had sprung forward.

"Fight! In the King's palace!" she cried in horror.
"Messieurs, it is death to you both."

"It is certainly death to one," muttered de Mouhy, grimly, as he drew his sword.

Marie burst into tears.

"Cowards!" she cried. "Oh, cowards! to bring such fear on a woman."

She knew the strength of the weapon she used.

De Mouhy's blade was instantly lowered.

"Another time," he said, looking fiercely at de Varais. The latter was twirling his moustachioes with an air of indifference.

"Any hour is suitable for the chastisement of a . . . Huguenot," he murmured, and sheathed his sword, his eyes on Marie Belleforêt's face.

Was it possible that she loved this fellow? Well, it mattered not if she did, since to-morrow he would die.

Without a word he turned and strode out of the room. De Mouhy, white with anger at the insult, would have followed him, but Marie laid her hand on his sleeve.

"Monsieur," she faltered, "I am afraid."

It was for de Mouhy to console her.

CHAPTER XII

THE BROODING OF THE STORM

“DE MOUHY ? ”
“Sire.”

“You have seen Marie Belleforêt to-day ? ”

“Yes, Sire.”

“And what did you tell her, man ? ”

The question was rapped out so sharply that de Mouhy stared—uncomprehending.

“Tell her, Sire ? ”

Henry laughed bitterly as he leant back in his seat.

“Tell her, yes, tell her ! Do you think she kisses you for your beauty ? They all kiss me, and I tell them what Catherine ought to know.”

De Mouhy's cheek crimsoned beneath its bronze.

“Sire, you wrong her.”

“Perhaps, but if I don't she'll wrong you.”

“She warned me, Sire, to tell her nothing ; that the Queen-Mother would question her.”

For a moment the cloud cleared from the young King's face, his laugh was buoyant.

“Good girl, good girl ! Ventre Ste. Gris ! Why then, she's in love.”

“In love ? ”

"With you, old addle-pate. It's well to know whom we can trust. Listen."

Through the open window came the sound of a song, sung by the mob in the street.

They sang much in Paris during those August days, but their songs were not merry ones—for Huguenot ears.

"A plague on the Huguenots, ah !
Let the cry of battle ring :
Huguenots, Huguenots, Huguenots, ah !
Long live the King !"

Loathing and contempt rang high in that brief " Ah ! " as though it were deadliest curse. But Henry mused on the last line.

" It is true," he said. " A Providence will be needed to save *this* King, de Mouhy. The Paris air is something strong—and Catherine doesn't let one sleep."

" Anything new, Sire ? "

" As I passed under a scaffold in the Rue des Petits Moines, half a dozen bricks just missed my head. Even yours wouldn't have withstood them, de Mouhy."

" An accident, Sire."

" Perhaps, but under the workman's blouse I caught a glimpse of the Medici colours."

Suddenly the mocking note in the King's voice was dropped, his grey eyes grew hard.

" Citron is dead."

De Mouhy started. " Your boarhound ? "

" Aye. Nothing in the world loved me so much."

The soldier's eyes moistened.

" Sire," he exclaimed reproachfully, and, kneeling, kissed his master's hand.

Henry smiled whimsically. "Ah, I should have excepted you, old friend," he added. "Well, to go on with my story. I had a cask of Cahors wine sent from Gascony—the King's wine might not suit me. It got lost for a day in the Palace on arrival. When it was opened, some of it spilt on the floor."

"And your dog licked it up?"

"Aye. He lived an hour. Poor beast! His eyes haunt me yet—they were not like Catherine's eyes, de Mouhy—they spoke the truth. My poor Citron, and I dared not let him lick my hand."

"He died for you, Sire, and therefore I cannot pity him. It is a death your Gascons covet."

"I fear many of them are like to die *with* me, if Catherine keeps as busy. She is a clever woman, de Mouhy, and presses her point—she would have made a good advocate. How she loves me! Yesterday she sent her carriage for me, the only one in Paris. It broke down in the Rue des Écoliers."

"You were not hurt, Sire?"

"No, I rode my horse. I put her gentleman in the carriage. He broke his neck. De Mouhy, the blow is going to fall."

"Sire, Sire, let us fly whilst there is time."

The whimsical smile played yet about Henry's lips, but there was something deeper than fear or laughter in his eyes.

"Nay," he replied softly. "If Catherine is clever, de Mouhy, Marguerite is still the most beautiful woman in France. I loved her picture, but even Clouet could

not paint the deeper shadows in her eyes, the tender invitation of those lips. And so—we stay in Paris—to laugh—to die—and not that all unhappily if a kiss comes first.”

“Perhaps, Sire, your fears are groundless.”

“Never you believe it, de Mouhy. Bernard Palissy has left Paris.”

“Bah! what of it? A potter!”

“A great genius. Then again, Philibert de l’Orme has gone, and Germain Pilon, Catherine’s architect, Huguenots all, don’t you understand? Catherine and Charles can make dukes and princes, as many as they please, but only God can make artists and architects, and the Tuileries has to be built. No, the blow is going to fall. The Guise, Anjou, Tavannes, the Queen-Mother, they worry Charles both morn and night. They only need to find him with a toothache, a corn that pinches, or an undigested dinner, and, *mordi!* we are dead men.”

“And yet you laugh with the loudest, and make love with the lightest!”

“We’re sitting on a volcano, if we don’t laugh the crust will crack. *Ventre Ste. Gris!* Do you think I care for death that comes in a minute, an hour, a day, and then is done? I’d give my life, my kingdom, aye, my Cause, if I could keep my honour and know my Margot true. That’s the hell I live in—doubt, suspicion, despair. Does my wife know? Is my Margot true? Ever since you brought me that letter the question has rapped on my brain, minute by minute, hour by hour. Does

Margot know? De Mouhy, it maddens me. I look into her eyes, and I'd pledge my soul that she and treachery have never met. Don't you see the damnable part of it? If it were only myself, I'd tell her and know the truth, but I can't betray my comrades. They are blind and live in a fool's paradise. The worst is, I am throwing her into the Guise's arms."

"Sire, I'll cut his throat in the Palace."

"And have all Paris on us. The populace adore him. He is more than the Pope to them."

"If she be false . . ."

"Why, then I'll laugh, de Mouhy, laugh as they laugh in hell!"

"She may be true!"

"Then not all the tears that first made ocean salt would wash out my remorse. But come, this conversation grows too serious, and at the Louvre Navarre can do nought but laugh. A grim jest, de Mouhy, to trip a measure with death, it sets one's sides aching. You are too grave, man. I must find merrier company. Gossip Charles is the man for my humour, let's seek him."

And, laying an affectionate hand on his friend's arm, Henry left his apartments to seek the King of France.

Charles was in his armoury, his favourite haunt, where some of the happiest hours of his life were spent. Here Pompée gave him his fencing lessons, and Ronsard wrote poems for him, or listened to those composed by his royal pupil himself. Here, too, was displayed the costly array of arms it had been his delight to collect, axes, halberds, shields and muskets covering

the walls. But to-day a new interest had seized the King's fancy, and he stood, leaning against the back of a high, carved chair watching Jean Goujon, the famous Huguenot sculptor, who was busily chipping away at the statue of his royal master.

At the entrance of Henry and de Mouhy, Charles turned eagerly.

"Ah, Harry, it is you!" he cried, with a note of welcome in his harsh voice. "I am glad it is not Anjou, he wearies me with his talk. I like best to listen to you with your tales of the chase. One day, soon, we will go hawking together. The air of Paris stifles me. That is how I feel when the Admiral talks to me. He makes me long—long to be free of my fetters, to go forth, battling to win glory and honour for France."

Henry laughed that gay laugh which drew hooked nose and curling chin together in quaint grimace.

"Doubtless you learn much from the Admiral, Sire," he said.

"Aye," nodded Charles, with a grim smile. "I learn that I have no greater enemy than my mother. Mort de tous les diables! Why can't she and Guise let me alone? And Anjou is as bad! I love my Huguenot friends. I love you, Harry and 'Foucauld. He makes me laugh, does 'Foucauld. Nay, Goujon, why do you stop? Go on with your work."

The sculptor bowed, hesitating.

"You will be tired, Sire."

"No, no, I shall not. You must go on. It will never be finished else."

Navarre looked keenly into the weak, flushed face.

"Never, Sire?" he questioned.

Charles's eyes wavered a little.

"I want it finished," he said sulkily. "Look at it, Harry. It is a fine statue."

Henry approached Goujon's side.

"Yes," he said, "it is a fine piece of work, but you should have your dog crouching at your feet, Sire. You, who are a hunter."

"There would not be time," said Charles hastily, and bit his lip with vexation, as the door opened and Catherine entered.

She smiled affectionately from Charles to Henry, and her purring voice was soft as velvet, as she asked: "Ah! you are talking of the chase, my son?"

"No, we are not," replied Charles, still more sulkily. "We are talking of my statue. Henry says Fidèle ought to be carved crouching at my feet, and I said, I said . . ."

"There was not time," laughed Henry carelessly. "Charles is in a great hurry to see the work finished, Madame."

Charles flung himself into a chair.

"Enough, Goujon," he said sharply, "you can go. After all, you were right. I am tired."

His sombre eyes glowed as he looked from the sculptor's smiling face to that of his mother.

Catherine laid a white, caressing hand on his shoulder.

"You must rest, my son," she murmured.

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CHAPTER XIII

AT THE MASQUE

THE great ballroom of the Louvre was gay with lights and the shimmer and glitter of satin and silk. Courtiers in gorgeous pourpoints of velvet and satin, slashed sleeves, and brightly coloured hose bowed to fair ladies still more resplendent in costumes of every colour beneath the sun. The plumage of birds of Paradise would have appeared dowdy beside them.

An air of gaiety and merriment had, for the time, lulled those ominous mutterings which, like some foreboding spirit, seemed for the last six weeks to have been hovering over Paris. Even de Mouhy smiled as he looked into the pretty eyes of Marie Belleforêt, whilst Henry's infectious and ever-ready laugh rang loud over the hum of conversation, and the light measure of the dance music.

Yet a moment after the King of Navarre had been festing uproariously with la belle Dayole he joined de Mouhy in the shadow of a curtain.

"We amuse ourselves, my friend," he whispered. "But for all that Ruggieri but now warned me that my first peril is to-night. The old *croque-mort*!

I know not in truth whether he plays me fair or false, but he says a young maid watched the beryl stone this morning, and saw me in the crystal making merry in the midst of splendour and the dance, when a thick mist enveloped me."

"Sire! What means the omen?"

"Oh, the Florentine was mysterious. He would say no more. Only that the danger was near. *Ventre Ste. Gris!* I knew that before. Still, a warning should never be neglected. Had another Henry borne that in mind, he had never tilted with the Scotsman—and so——"

"Sire, look, the King calls you to his side."

Henry smiled. To look at him as he crossed the great room one would have thought he had not a care in the world, so debonair, so light-hearted did he appear.

But Catherine looked at Anjou and nodded, as though in triumph.

"Ah, Henry," cried Charles petulantly, "come and sit by me. Anjou bores me with his politics, but you laugh and never ask for anything."

"Because I lack nothing, Sire. With my dear Margot here, what could a man want more?"

And Henry of Navarre looked across to where his fair bride stood in the midst of a circle of admirers, who appeared to be laughing heartily at some witticism she had just uttered. For a moment Henry's gaze became intense. What an adorable creature she was, this Marguerite—his pearl—and yet not his at all!

Never had he seen her looking more lovely ; he caught back his breath in an involuntary sigh as he turned to the King.

"Ask M. de Guise, my dear brother," Charles was saying. "They want—what do you think they want? Shall I tell you?"

"Ventre Ste. Gris! No, Sire. I'm sure they wouldn't like it! Give them their way, but don't ask counsel of me, or I shall be as dull as they."

Charles chuckled, the cunning look in his eyes deepening. For the last month the Guise and his mother had left him no peace, growing daily more insistent that the massacre of the Huguenots should take place.

The reiteration of oft-repeated arguments, however, only increased the natural stubbornness bred in him. Besides, Harry of Navarre was good company. He laid his hand on his brother-in-law's arm with a smile of malicious humour. "But they want me to——" he began slyly.

"Do it, Sire," laughed Henry.

"But you haven't heard what it is yet."

"I wasn't born for a king, Sire. I always say yes."

"Then you are always giving."

"No, Sire. I said yes till I had given all away. I have nothing left to give. But I still say yes—so consent, Sire."

Charles's wavering eyes looked cunningly round the room, then back to his brother-in-law's laughing face.

"If I didn't love you, Harry, I would not wait a day. You don't know what you are saying."

"But *you* know, Sire, and while you love me I want to know no more. I trust you, Sire."

Charles's gaze became fixed on those dominant grey eyes.

"You shall," he said, starting to his feet as the Guise approached. "Come, a dance, a dance, this is no time for state-craft."

The rising of the King was a signal. The musicians struck up a lively air, soon the great room was a mass of whirling figures, whilst the tapping of high heels and the soft swish of gowns formed a further accompaniment to low laughter and merry voices.

It was the scene of a revel, and all seemed joy and gaiety. Yet some did not dance. They watched instead. Of these was de Mouhy, who had decided that he needed more lessons from his fair instructress ere venturing on joining the merry throng in public—and—strange to say—Marie Belleforêt was beside him, in spite of the vain persuasions of de Varais, who glowered vindictively at the young Huguenot gentleman who stood so staunchly by Mademoiselle Marie's side.

"At dawn to-morrow," he muttered, as he brushed rudely against de Mouhy's sleeve. "In the gardens of the Louvre."

De Mouhy bowed. "We Huguenots," he replied coldly, "do not meet our foes except in battle. The day is surely not far distant, Monsieur, when we two shall thus face the other's sword-point."

De Varais sneered.

"Coward," he muttered. "What! You won't fight? Well, we shall see—we shall see." And he laughed even whilst he scowled as he walked on.

De Mouhy's face was white as he looked after him.

"Yet I am right," he muttered. "I saw the Guise holding him in converse. They think it would be easier to slay the master if the watch-dog were dead. I would not trust their honour—and Henry has need of me."

Meantime Mademoiselle Belleforêt, not having caught the muttered words between the two men, was chattering away gaily, and, if her little feet kept time with the music, she was content to stay and be worshipped by this awkward, silent, but very sincerely admiring giant.

"The Queen of Navarre is looking superb to-night, is she not, Monsieur de Mouhy? She is without doubt the most beautiful woman in France; do you not think so?"

"My master does, Mademoiselle," replied de Mouhy.

"And you—you think so too?"

Her blue eyes were sparkling up at him over the edge of her fan.

"For myself, Mademoiselle," he replied stolidly, "I have seen fairer."

"Indeed? Are your women of Gascony, then, so charming?"

"Nay, Mademoiselle, they are not to be compared with those of Paris."

"Ah, then, she is in Paris, this rival of Queen Marguerite's? I confess I long to see such a beauty."

"Mademoiselle, you have but to gaze in the nearest mirror."

Marie clapped her hands.

"A compliment! Oh, Monsieur de Mouhy, you improve. In time I believe you will be a courtier. Is it not so?"

"Nay, Mademoiselle, I have no taste for a Court life."

"Have you not? How strange! It is amusing. For instance, look around. Is there not much to interest you? See, then, I must show you what I mean. There, look across to the opposite corner; you see that lady in the green satin farthingale? It is Isabeau de Limeuil. Some vow she is hideous, others that she is Venus herself, for myself I should have thought that the late Monsieur de Condé would have had better taste. Then the dame yonder; she *was* a beauty ten years ago; Antoinette de Roubet, Monsieur. You should know the name, which was one that they say your King of Navarre's father found very fair indeed. Nay! You look shocked. One cannot afford to be easily shocked in Paris. But see, I will amuse you. Do you observe that Monsieur there with the curious nose? It is of silver, that nose—Monsieur Nez Argent he is called—his own nose was shot off at Moncontour, so I do not think he loves the Huguenots—even a silver nose does not compensate one for one's own. Then—ah! the Queen of Navarre calls me; I must go to her. Farewell, Monsieur."

She smiled at de Mouhy as she rose, flitting across

the room like some brilliant-plumaged humming-bird, leaving her cavalier to gaze after her with adoring but sombre eyes.

It is not easy work to make love on the edge of a volcano.

The Guise had been dancing with the Queen of Navarre. They made a handsome pair, as some in that crowded room did not fail to remark. But the Guise was unlike Navarre, he did not find much to make him laugh in Paris, not even the fair Marguerite. He was serious, this young Duke of scarcely three-and-twenty summers; some might have even called his face saturnine, for all its comely features, and the scar—which had earned him the same sobriquet of Balafré as his father—added to an already sinister expression. It is tiring to dance too long on an August night, and weariness does not lend itself to wit. Marguerite was silent as her partner led her at length to a seat. Although they were still surrounded by a gay throng, they were sufficiently apart to converse in an undertone without fear of being overheard.

The young Queen was a trifle pale as she leant back, her eyes anywhere but on the face of the man beside her. The sinister look was growing in those dark, keen eyes; yet beneath it glowed one deeper still. It was to meet that deeper look which Marguerite feared, for she had seen an iron hand gripping a comfit box, crushing it into the palm as though a convulsive fit had seized its owner. Yet the Guise's voice was pitched in a low and even key when he spoke.

"When can I see you alone, Margot?"

The music was drumming in her ears, the whirl of the dancers made her giddy; in despair Marguerite turned to look into that set, saturnine face, and shuddered as she looked.

"You forget," she whispered between dry lips, "I am a Queen."

Guise laughed—a soft, mocking echo of empty merriment.

"Aye, Queen among Queens, as you were always my queen of women, the unmatched flower, the Marguerite of France. When can I see you alone?"

A pause—from the other end of the room the King of Navarre's boisterous laugh rang out. At the sound Marguerite drew herself up with a little sigh—a sigh which spoke of many things, many emotions.

"Never—now."

"Never? Do you think such love as mine can always be kept at a distance? Nothing could long keep me from your side."

A look of mischievous defiance flashed for an instant over Marguerite's troubled face. No woman can wholly hate a lover, and this one was in earnest, even though unwelcome.

"I shall go South," said she, "and put the Loire between us."

"I would swim it in deepest flood to look upon your face."

"At Nérac the castle walls are high."

"I would scale the mountains themselves to die in your arms."

Marguerite looked again into the face so close to hers. It was a mask, saving the eyes, but they were on fire. Though she shuddered she smiled. It was pleasant to have such power, and she did not realize the danger of exerting it. Therefore she fanned the flame.

"You might swim the river and scale the castle walls, but still—I have a husband," she murmured.

The Guise frowned. He was not used to a woman's defiance.

"A Huguenot!" he retorted, "a heretic, who is never by your side. Ah, you start. Did you think that the whole Court didn't know it? Are you going to endure it, Margot?"

"The whole Court knows it?"

"Aye, and Madame de Sauve says——"

Instinctively the young Queen sprang to her feet.

"Charlotte de Sauve!" she cried, and there was no doubt that he had touched a weak spot in her woman's armour.

"Sit down, Margot," he whispered. "Henry is watching us."

"Henry!"

"Your husband! He who treats a Princess of France like a peasant girl, and passes her by with a glance! Where is your pride, Princess?"

Marguerite laughed harshly. But her lip bled.

"In the dust," she said.

"Then rouse yourself, and treat him with the contempt he has shown you."

"You love me—Henry of Guise?"

"I worship you. You, Margot."

"Is it the Princess you woo, or the woman?"

"The woman, a thousand times the woman. The Guise is great enough to love where he will, to love for love alone. Oh, that you were a beggar girl that I might make you a Queen."

"If I were sure——"

"Look at him," interrupted Guise softly, and drew her eyes to where the King of Navarre mingled gaily with the dancers.

"I will come to your room to-night," he added, bending still closer to the beautiful woman at his side. "And you, Margot, will give me your answer?"

Marguerite's hands were locked together in agony, love, jealousy, fear, fascination, and horror struggling for ascendancy in the depths of her dark eyes.

"No, no," she replied. "No, M. de Guise."

"I will come," he answered stubbornly, his dominant will compelling her gaze. "When you send me that ribbon." And he pointed to a bow of wide blue ribbon on her shoulder.

Marguerite shivered—as a bird shivers beneath the fascination of a snake.

"I have my pride, I shall not send it," she whispered beneath her breath.

The Guise was triumphant.

"It is because you have pride that you *will* send it," he murmured as he rose and left her side.

Marguerite watched the silver and grey figure out of sight.

She drew a sigh of relief when it had disappeared.

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT JEALOUSY WHISPERED

DID he ever tire of laughing—that volatile King of Navarre? It appeared not. His mirth was unquenchable.

He had been laughing all that evening, he was laughing now as he came down the ballroom amongst the dancers. Marie Belleforêt was at his side.

“You danced adorably, Marie,” Henry was whispering in her ear. “De Mouhy is a lucky fellow.”

Marie’s piquante face was wreathed in smiles, compliments from a King—even a Gascon—are as dearly to be prized as roses in winter.

“Sire,” she replied, curtsying her thanks, “I think he is—to have such a master.”

Henry swept her a bow, laughing lightly.

“To have such a mistress. Come, Marie, I’ll tell you a secret.”

Marie turned a shade paler, glancing quickly and apprehensively to the upper end of the apartment, where the Queen-Mother talked with her younger son. “You mustn’t,” she whispered breathlessly into the King’s ear. “Didn’t de Mouhy tell you? The dullard!”

"It's all right, Marie; my secrets are for the whole world. You can tell it to Catherine herself."

Marie smiled, replying aloud: "I shall be honoured, Your Majesty. His Majesty is going to tell me a secret!"

A chorus arose at once from the ladies near. Instantly a garland of the choicest flowers from the famous Flying Squadron were gathered around the pair.

"May I not hear too, Sire?" demanded Made-moiselle de Torigni, a heavy-lidded, blue-eyed blonde, whose languorous glances had been aimed vainly all the evening against the Sieur de Montmorenci, whose whole thoughts were given undividedly to horse and hound.

"And I, too, Sire?" chimed in another.

"And I?"

"And I?"

Blue eyes, black eyes, brown eyes, hazel eyes looked up boldly into grey eyes, some beseeching, some coy, some plaintive, some arch.

There was a spice of very real merriment in Henry's laugh as he looked from one to the other, with his finger on his lips.

"Ventre Ste. Gris! yes; but you'll not tell? Hush! it's about my wife."

He glanced knowingly towards the corner where the Guise parted from the Queen of Navarre.

"Yes, Sire, yes."

"I vow."

"I promise."

"Ah, Sire."

This last from Marie, whose curiosity had vanished, in fear of what was coming.

But Henry paid no heed to the reproach in the last voice.

"You are sure?" he whispered, with a cautious glance in the direction of Catherine.

"Yes, yes, yes," rang out the silver chorus, whilst the knot of eager beauties crowded close, leaving Marie Belleforêt anxious and wide-eyed on their outskirts.

Henry bent low.

"She's the best wife and the most beautiful woman in France," he murmured, and then threw back his dark head with a laugh that would have been infectious had it not been for the mortification of his disappointed hearers. But sour looks and pouting lips only made Henry laugh the more as he turned aside to take de Mouhy's arm.

"Let them tell that to the Queen-Mother," he said beneath his breath; "she will expect news after so much excitement, and I would not deny her." Made-moiselle Belleforêt, who stood near, laughed too, but very softly, for Catherine was one that it were wiser to laugh *with* than *at*.

At some little distance the Queen of Navarre sat alone. Since the Guise had left her she had not moved, rejecting all overtures from the gallants who buzzed around her. There was only one whom Marguerite would have welcomed then, and he kept ever in the

distance. Yet her eyes looked wistfully from time to time in her husband's direction. How gay, how handsome he looked. Ah! why did he not come and stand by her now, and gaze down into her eyes, as he had for one brief moment on their day of betrothal? She had dreamt of that moment and that look so often, hearing again the note of pleading and passion in the voice which had spoken her name as his arms clasped her, and the grey eyes looked deep into her own.

But the moment had passed, and with it, seemingly, the lover. He had not looked into her eyes since—only into those of her mother's ladies.

The Princess gave a little gasp at the thought, and for a moment the lights and moving throng swam before her eyes, then the mist cleared, and she saw her husband coming slowly down the room towards her. Was he coming to her? Was he coming to her? And was it the lover who rode across France to hear her voice, or the husband who had flouted and deserted her?

Even as she watched, her heart beating fast in spite of her desire to keep calm, she saw Henry stop. A lady had swept between him and the figure seated in the corner, so lonely, yet so beautiful, so piteous, yet so proud. Marguerite bit her lip till the blood came. She recognized Charlotte de Sauve.

Henry was smiling gaily, as he bowed before the fair-haired little beauty, whose blue eyes were as innocent as their owner was treacherous.

"Ah! Madame," he exclaimed, loudly enough for Marguerite to hear, "why did the music stop? There is only one woman more adorable than Madame de Sauve dancing!"

Marguerite smiled, hiding her dimples behind her fan as she met the fair Charlotte's jealous glance.

But Madame de Sauve was something besides a woman, namely, the spy of the Queen-Mother. It is dangerous to leave a task unfulfilled, even though vanity be outraged by a boor. So she set her lips in a forced smile, as, glancing from Henry to Marguerite, she murmured, "And that is——"

Henry appeared quite unconscious of his wife's neighbourhood.

"Madame de Sauve seated," he replied, leading her to a seat, and bowing low before her.

It was a moment of triumph to one listener, of chagrin to the other.

Whilst Marguerite turned aside with an air of assumed indifference Charlotte de Sauve smiled radiantly upon her royal partner.

"Ah, Sire," she whispered, "you flatter me. I cannot hope that my beauty can *compare*——" she glanced towards Marguerite, who sat humming a little tune and keeping time with one dainty foot. Each of the three players in the little drama was aware that the Queen-Mother's lynx eyes were upon them.

"If I love the lily I need not hate the rose," said Henry lightly.

Madame's blue eyes became liquid with emotion.

She was decidedly beautiful, this baby-faced conspirator, and she knew how to play her part—certainly not a hard one, since this volatile youth was, after all, little more than a raw lad from a mountain home.

“ Oh, Sire ! ” she whispered, “ if I thought you loved me——”

The white lids fluttered.

“ You would be kind ? ” asked Henry in an undertone.

“ If you would prove it, and would trust me, Sire.”

The grey eyes gleamed. Surely hawks see far.

“ Trust you ? ” laughed the King of Navarre. “ Why, of course. See, you’ve turned a passable King into a very poor poet.”

Madame de Sauve clapped her hands.

“ You have written verses, Sire ? ” she cried aloud. “ And for me ? You will read them ? I am dying to hear.”

Her voice arrested the attention of King Charles, who was passing.

“ What, verses, Harry ? ” he exclaimed. “ Come, man, read them, read them.”

The fair Charlotte was flushed with triumph.

“ They are mine, Sire,” she murmured, glancing from one King to the other, whilst the courtiers gathered round.

Unseen, Marguerite had leant forward a little. Her eyes were no longer indifferent.

Henry unfolded a small roll of parchment, whilst his glance wandered carelessly round the throng. Did

it rest for a moment on Marguerite's set face? It might have done; yet he read—

"The nymphs have left their pleasant streams,
The fairies left the grove,
Deserted is the land of dreams,
Of beauty, light and love.

"No sound of laughter in the brook,
No rustle in the leaf,
No echo comes from cave or nook,
No voice of joy or grief.

"Dryad and nymph to Court are gone,
And never more will rove,
From her who makes all beauty one,
My sweet Charlotte de Sauve."

As he finished Charles clapped him on the back, laughing loudly.

"Faith, Harry," he cried, "you move apace; the hunter is as great a courtier as them all."

Henry bowed. "When Your Majesty takes up the pen," he said, "your courtiers can do no less."

Charles shrugged his shoulders.

"I write but indifferently, Harry," he said.

"Indeed, Sire, they tell me that Ronsard has turned hunter."

Again Charles laughed, well pleased at such a compliment, for surely never yet did dabbler court the Muses without dreaming himself a genius. Meantime Madame de Sauve was in ecstasies. She fancied that she had seen even the Queen-Mother smile towards her.

"Oh, Sire!" she exclaimed, "what beautiful verses!"

"H'm! They're not bad—for a King."

Charlotte's tender glance was reproachful.

"Nay, Sire, you wrong yourself. Had you not been a King you would have been a great poet."

"Had I *not* been a King, no one would have thought so."

More reproach in the swimming eyes and in the soft voice.

"Does Your Majesty never believe any one sincere?"

"Yes, I know I am myself—sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"When I look into a fair lady's face."

Charlotte flashed a coquettish look into the whimsical, inscrutable face above her.

"Any fair lady's?"

"Charlotte de Sauve's."

"You mean it, Sire?"

"How can I prove it? I will put my verses to music, and sing them outside your chamber window to-night."

"To me, Sire?"

Fair head and dark were close together. Marguerite sprang to her feet and swept across the room to where Marie Belleforêt was standing. As she passed, Henry looked up into a proud, flushed face, whose eyes gleamed with hot anger.

There was no doubt that the Queen of Navarre had lost her temper.

"To me, Sire?" murmured Charlotte, still more tenderly.

"To you," replied Henry coldly. His apparent ardour had suddenly deserted him. "And to the stars, Madame, if the stars will listen."

"And you trust me, Sire?" whispered the siren.

"Try me."

"Then tell me—why you,—no, I cannot say—I'm afraid, Sire."

"Afraid? Then you do not love me?"

"Tell me why you have flouted——"

Henry's eyes seemed to narrow.

"Go on, Madame," he said quietly.

"Why you have deserted the Queen of Navarre, the most beautiful woman in France, for poor little me?"

"I will, Madame de Sauve. Because I am not worthy of her, because I am only fit for her ladies and her maids."

Charlotte's laugh was not a very mirthful one! A flash of something which was not all tender innocence gleamed for a second in her blue eyes. "You are too modest, Sire," she said. "Is M. de Guise worthy of the Queen of Navarre?"

For an instant the smiling mask was lifted from Henry's face. Madame de Sauve caught a glimpse of grey eyes, keen and fierce as an eagle's, burning into hers, whilst the nascent moustache on the King's upper lip seemed to bristle with anger.

"Madame," he replied, and though his voice was low, it would have reminded a Gascon of how the thunder growls amongst the chasms and gorges of the snow-clad Pyrenees, "you are not a man, therefore I cannot

call you to account. Yet, believe me, your beauty would go better with a quiet tongue. Tell Catherine that, my sweet Charlotte de Sauve."

He laughed, recovering himself as he saw the bitter chagrin on her clouded face, and, as he laughed, his nose once more drew itself down to meet that curling chin.

Madame de Sauve was silent, silent still as he bowed and left her, but there were tears in her blue eyes as she stamped her little foot angrily on the floor.

"The boor!" she whispered. "The loutish Béarnais. To think that he dared so rebuke me. A—ah!" Her lips closed viciously.

Just then she did not love His Majesty of Navarre.

CHAPTER XV

THE FIGURE IN THE MIRROR

IT might have been some consolation to Charlotte de Sauve had she known of the feelings which her softly-murmured conversation with the Béarnais had aroused in the heart of his wife. The moment when grey eyes met black was forgotten, the quick thrill inspired by the whisper of her name remained only as a goad to taunt the unhappy Princess with her shame.

To have dreamt she could have—might have—perhaps did—love this man who thus made love to another woman under her very eyes ! No wonder the Queen of Navarre was angry.

Impulsive as a child, already Marguerite was thinking of revenge.

If Henry chose to scorn her, to reject her, and break with the empty farce which had been played at Nôtre Dame a few days since, she would show she was not behindhand. At any rate, she must see the Guise, see him and ask him what she should do. He loved her, he would help her. His uncle the Cardinal of Lorraine was all-powerful at Rome, and the dispensation had not arrived. This hateful marriage should be annulled ;

she would be Marguerite de Valois again with the Court—and the Guise—at her feet, not Marguerite de Navarre the laughing-stock of her own women.

Burning with indignation, the Princess beckoned Marie to her side.

"Marie," she whispered imperiously, "take this ribbon to the Duc de Guisé, and say one word—'To-night.'"

The girl's eyes widened even as she took the ribbon, curtseying.

"To-night, Madame?"

"Aye, to-night," replied Marguerite impatiently. "He will understand." And she turned away so that Marie should not read her face.

The dancing was over by this time, and groups of courtiers were gathered in knots about the room, talking and laughing with the ladies of the Queen-Mother's train.

The scene was still gay and brilliant, but already Charles was beginning to get bored. The ladies of the Court had no interest for him.

"Where is Ruggieri?" he cried impatiently, looking round for some new excitement.

Instantly a figure dressed in a long dark robe glided out from the shadow of the tapestries.

"Here, Sire," exclaimed a well-known voice.

Charles started nervously.

"Peste, man," he said irritably, "where did you spring from? You startled me. But, come, you promised us a glimpse into future events."

The Florentine bowed, his dark eyes fixed intently on the weak, quivering face of the young King of France. Charles was flushed, and his eyes, bright with nervous excitement, wandered with all the irresolution of an ill-balanced mind.

"The future, Sire," said Ruggieri, "reveals itself but dimly, only at moments is it clear, as a lightning-illuminated land."

"It is well. Even a moment can tell us much. Show me how long I shall reign, and show me who comes after me."

"Let the lights be lowered, Sire. The great glass is prepared."

All the Court was crowding now about the King, and low whisperings and titterings could be heard as ladies made an excuse of nervous fears to draw their cavaliers closer to their sides.

De Mouhy had found little Marie Belleforêt and clasped small, cold fingers in his own strong grasp.

"What! You tremble, Mademoiselle?" he whispered. "Would you not see what the future holds?"

She smiled shyly up into the dark, eager face. "For myself perhaps—yes," she whispered; "but—but not for others. I know not why, but—I am afraid. Hold my hand tightly, Monsieur."

She was thinking of Monsieur de Guise's face when she had given him her mistress's ribbon.

Flutterings and subdued laughter, exclamations of pretended fears, and assurances of protection, were

hushed to silence as the lights were dimmed in accordance with the astrologer's request.

Queen Catherine stood between her two younger sons, Charles a little in advance with Henry of Navarre by his side, his hand resting affectionately on his brother-in-law's shoulder.

"Do you trust these prophecies, Harry?" he whispered, as the curtain was slowly drawn back, revealing a large mirror.

Henry laughed. "When I want a fortune for my sweetheart," he replied lightly.

He could feel the trembling pressure of the hand on his shoulder.

"I distrust them," muttered Charles moodily; "but I cannot forget Luke Gaurice foretold my father's death."

"Hush," said Henry, pointing to the mirror. "The mist breaks, surely a figure appears."

The great room was plunged into almost total darkness, but a faint light seemed to gleam beneath the surface of the glass, at which all gazed spellbound, even the noisiest chatterer in that great throng silenced by that indefinable sense of awe which creeps like some cold chill over the heart when any dare attempt to raise the veil which hides the unseen mists of the future. Shuddering, yet fascinated, all looked, and drawn-back breaths of fear sounded like the hissing sigh of the waves which roll back silently into the great deep.

Then a voice, harsh and fear-stricken, broke the spell.

"It is myself, even as I live to-day," cried Charles excitedly, as the mists, breaking asunder on the face of the mirror, disclosed the figure of a young man clad in purple velvet, a crown encircling his brow, his thin face flushed, his eyes bright and wandering.

There indeed stood the King of France looking at them as in life from the face of the mirror. Charles himself stared wildly back at his own image, his lips moving with convulsive excitement, his grasp on Henry's shoulder becoming vice-like.

"Silence, Sire," commanded Ruggieri's deep, solemn tones; "your voice will break the spell. Each year you have to live the figure will appear."

Slowly, as he spoke, the phantom faded. Only the iridescent light remained behind.

Silence,—suspense rather,—held all silent; not a sound broke the tense hush of that gazing crowd. And if any smiled it was Catherine alone, as her eyes sought those of the Duc d'Anjou in the darkness. A moment—then again the mists broke, and the same figure stood gazing down upon them.

"Look, look," cried Charles, too intensely excited to remember the astrologer's warning. "It grows clear again, and strong and well."

The figure faded. But Charles laughed happily.

"Am I not young with many years to reign? See, Harry, it comes again."

For the third time the mists had parted, again a figure seemed to glide slowly out upon the smooth surface of the glass.

A moment of horror, in which a woman cried aloud and others muttered beneath their breaths the names of patron saints.

But Charles stood spellbound. No velvet-clad youth stood now before them in health and strength, but a thin, emaciated form bathed from head to foot in blood.

"Look, look," cried Charles, but his harsh voice was pitched to a note of agony. "It sweats at every pore, and see—the perspiration on the brow is blood—blood. Ah! it's gone. Wait—wait, it will come again—no—yes,—ah, yes, it *must* come again. I cannot die so soon."

The last words rose to a shrill scream as the young King clutched his temples, the sweat standing in great drops upon his forehead, his eyes wild with the light of madness. The mists were parting on the mirror for a fourth time.

Charles caught his breath with a gasp of relief. "Ah, once more!" Then, as he looked, he started violently. "That is not I," he groaned, as a figure rose faintly to view.

Behind the King, Catherine was smiling.

"Watch, watch," she whispered, caressing Anjou's hand; "it is the Béarnais."

The silence was intense. Slowly the figure became clearer.

It was Anjou's voice now which rose in a shrill crescendo of triumph.

"Look, Charles, look. It is Navarre, crowned King."

Silence again. The figure was clear now, no mists obscuring the slender, dainty figure in its gorgeous brocade and high ruff, its white hands and simpering, painted face.

It was not the Béarnais who stood looking down on that awed company—but Anjou.

The Duke was the first to realize this.

“Mon Dieu!” he muttered, “it is myself—and Charles——”

Instinctively he drew back, since the light, flung by the mirror, shone on the faces of those gathered nearest.

Charles’s features had become hideously distorted as he gazed, fascinated, at the simpering figure before him. His lips quivered and slobbered, as those of a man in a frenzy, his cheeks were ashen, his eyes wild with insane fury.

Anjou’s voice seemed to rouse him.

“My brother, King,” he screamed. “Anjou, *King*, while I die bathed in sweat of blood?”

He burst into delirious laughter, snatching at the dagger he wore in his belt.

“It shall not be,” he cried. “Never, never!” And, wheeling round, he sprang towards his brother, who stood, cowering, unable to escape through the dense crowd.

“When you are dead I’ll laugh at prophecies,” mocked the King, and clutched the Duke by the throat in a grip of iron.

Not a soul moved. Horror seemed to have chained

the bravest to their places, not an arm was raised to avert the terrible catastrophe. Even Catherine, white to her lips, was too petrified to move to the help of her favourite child.

One long moment of silence, broken by the wild laughter of the maddened King as he raised his dagger.

Another instant and Anjou would have lain dead at his brother's feet had not Henry of Navarre rushed forward and caught the uplifted arm.

"Let go, Harry," screamed Charles, furiously struggling. "Let go, I say. Fool, do you not know that Anjou wants your life? Do you not know that he wants to massacre—let go, or you die too. Fool, fool, fool."

But, though he writhed and fought against that strong grip, he was impotent in its clasp, for Henry's muscles had grown strong in a life far removed from the soft luxury and pampering of a Court.

"Lights, lights, you fools," he shouted to the crowd of white-faced, gibbering courtiers who still stood spell-bound. "The lights will bring him to. Sire, sire, it is your brother. Sire, think, you are the King. Where is Your Majesty?"

As he spoke some of those around ran for lights, and soon the glare of torches and candles gleamed ruddily upon the tragic scene.

With the lights Charles's senses seemed to return to him, although his face was still livid as he dropped the dagger and turned towards Catherine, who had managed to stagger forward between the brothers.

"Mother," he muttered gloomily, "this is your trick. Where is Ruggieri? He shall hang for this, aye, hang, when the rack has twisted all his limbs, and the wedge has crushed his bones."

His eyes roved wildly, lighting on his trembling brother.

"Anjou," he growled, "beware! If you once look higher than my shoulder, I'll leave you nothing to wear a crown upon," and he poured forth a volley of terrible oaths as he spoke, then turned to Navarre.

"Harry, you're a fool," he added contemptuously—"a fool."

And so saying he strode from the room, the crowd falling back from him as he went, muttering gloomily to himself.

Catherine's face was curiously pale, her hand trembled with unwonted nervousness as she laid it on Anjou's sleeve.

"We are not safe, my son," she whispered. "The poison's in his blood, he'll not forget."

The Duke of Anjou scowled. He had been badly frightened, and, for the hero of such battles at Jarnac and Moncontour had not behaved with conspicuous bravery.

"Why did you not remember that the prophecy says I reign too?" he snarled. "As it is, Charles will kill me in one of his mad moods. Only the Béarnais saved me."

A look of hate flashed in Catherine's quiet eyes at the mention of Navarre's name!

"The Béarnais. Ah!" she whispered bitterly. Then in a lighter tone, "Come, my son, we must after and pacify your brother."

And she placed her hand in his.

CHAPTER XVI

A DEADLY TOAST

THE great room was empty, save for two figures—two who stood apart—silent. Outside could be heard the hum of voices as the courtiers hurried away down the gallery—a flock of sheep who followed their leader's bell.

Henry of Navarre stood leaning against the back of a high, carved chair, his grey eyes staring moodily before him into space.

There was no need to laugh, just then, since he was alone.

A touch on his sleeve made him start. Turning he faced Marguerite, who stood there, flushed, with lovely head drooping slightly, and deprecating eyes fixed on his.

What eyes they were! But Henry did not strive to fathom their depths. Instead he laughed very bitterly.

"Why do you not fly with the Court?" he cried. "I have offended your brother. Mordieu! A leper with bells would not have frightened them more."

His lean, brown hand gripped the back of the chair as he spoke.

Marguerite smiled, and for an instant her lashes swept her cheek.

"I stay with my husband. You have saved me a brother, but more—I thank you for having kept Charles's hands clean. I love Charles, and for all his mad fits I think Charles loves me."

The hand on the chair loosened its clasp. "Charles loves me—while Anjou is his heir," mocked Henry, and their eyes met.

Involuntarily Marguerite stretched out her little hand and laid it softly on the strong brown one which still rested on the chair.

"Sire," she whispered, forgetful of the past horror, forgetful of pride, anger, jealousy, even contrition—all, saving that at last she was alone with the man who had once looked long into the shadow of her eyes.

"Sire," she repeated, "why did you marry me?"

She spoke bravely, determined that she would hear her fate, and know what lay for her in life. But the mirror was not Ruggieri's, only a pair of grey eyes.

They smiled into hers, but turned instantly away.

"Look in your glass, child," was Henry's reply; "you will find reason enough there."

But the quivering of strong muscles beneath her touch made her purpose stronger.

"Spare me your praises, Sire," said she, "and tell me why you wedded me? Had I such thoughts as you must have had for me, not all the Kings that ever reigned in France had made me become your bride. Sire, why did you marry me?"

A long pause.

Henry's head was still averted, as though he dared not trust himself to look into those dark, beseeching eyes. His strong voice shook a little when at length he made answer.

"I married you to bring our country peace. God puts us here for but a little space, but France lives on. France comes before all. She is drenched with blood, and bare with famine, Margot. As I rode here I saw the peasants harnessed to the plough, the King had seized their oxen. And the hunger—you don't know what hunger is."

"I have been lost in the chase, and spent the night in the wood."

"You have not seen the bones bursting through the skin and the eyes wild and vacant. You have not heard the wailing sobs of little children who cry in vain to their parents for the food they have not to give. If you had I think it would sound in your ears even above the music of the pageant or the chanting of the mass."

Marguerite shuddered, covering her face with her hands.

"Ah, it is horrible, horrible!"

"It is what war has done," replied Henry grimly, and his face was that of a careworn man rather than of the laughing youth who danced and sang, mocked and giped all day. "I care not if I praise God in French or Latin; but I have sworn that I will give my country peace. Margot, if I had hated you I would have married you."

The white hand had slipped from the brown, big tears

welled in the young Princess's eyes, and fell with a silent splash upon the blue love-knots on the breast of her corsage.

Patriotism may kindle enthusiasm in the heart of a noble woman, yet surely the noblest would find the passion cold and unsatisfying where life is barren of love! And Marguerite was less heroine than spoilt child who had but now found her woman's soul.

And now—now. Another tear fell, and lay like a glittering diamond-drop on her smooth cheek.

"All was for France, then," she whispered, "and nothing for the woman. Your boy in Gascony was but a dream?"

Henry's swarthy cheeks flushed darkly as he turned his gaze upon the upturned face. "No," he muttered hoarsely, "you know not what I suffer. I have a garden full of roses. I may not pluck one—not one. Oh, Margot, I would give life and soul to serve my country, but all the joy of the world is wrapped in you. Margot, I will trust you. Will you be mine indeed? Mine, Margot—my wife?"

Had her heart thrilled when he first looked into her eyes on their betrothal day? Had she thought to read his soul in that first glance? If so, what was she reading now whilst her heart leapt, panting in her breast, as she saw her image mirrored in grey depths? The tear was scarce dry on her cheek, but it was lost now in a dimple. Her eyes were wet, but yet they shone like twin stars undazzled by the glory of the sun.

"You love me—you love me, Harry?" she cried,

and the joy in her voice outrang whatever there had been before of pain in her heart.

The King of Navarre smiled, and there was neither mock nor sneer on his lips now, only the glad triumph of a man who comes unexpectedly within sight of his goal.

"Yes," he said very simply, "I love you."

She flung out both her hands with a gesture of almost childish content and trust.

"Harry."

He had caught the soft white fingers between his own strong ones, and so they stood, with nothing in the world for which to care or trouble since the love-light shone from black eyes into grey and back again from grey to black. Then, loosening his clasp, he took the beautiful face between his hands and slowly bent his head to the level of her lips.

"'Tis thus we seal our troth, my Margot," quoth he softly, and kissed her as a lover.

.

Presently she raised herself in his arms, and there was a question in her dreaming eyes.

"And Madame de Sauve?" she faltered, and the shadow was something deeper than that of screening lashes.

But Henry's laughter was buoyant as the breeze which chases shadows from the dancing light.

"A spy of the Queen-Mother's, sweetheart," he cried softly. "I play with her as she would play with me."

"Then you will not go to sing without her window to-night?"

"No, for I will be with you, my heart."

The dark head drooped on his shoulder, pride, jealousy, doubts, all forgotten in the happiness of love's dream. But another memory set her pulses leaping with a sudden discordant jar. What of the Guise? What of the mad impulse which had bidden her seek help for outraged pride from such an one as this importunate lover? Life looked so different from what it had an hour ago, and was all to be shattered, all life's happiness lost because of a moment's pique—a mad folly?

"To-night," she whispered, "no, not to-night, Harry, do not come to-night." Her face had whitened as she met the flash of suspicion in his glance.

"Not to-night?" he repeated, and his clasp involuntarily loosened round her waist. "You are playing with me, Margot, you do not love me?"

Then she clung to him as though it were her happiness slipping from her.

"I do, I do," she pleaded; "by sweet St. Genéviève, I vow it."

"Then why may I not come to-night?"

"I cannot tell you. Yet trust me, trust me, my love. You have tortured me for so many days, have faith for just one more."

It was impossible to withstand such an appeal. The grey eyes softened into a great tenderness, as he smoothed back an errant curl from her forehead.

"I have been cruel, it is true. Yes, I will trust you, Margot. I swear I will not come unless you send for me."

She nestled happily in his arms. "Ah, Harry!" she whispered softly, "how can I thank you . . . to have your trust . . . and love . . ."

Yet, as he would have kissed her again, the door opened, and the King of France entered with his mother, followed by that faithful flock—his Court. Charles was very white, but, though his lips still twitched, his eyes were sane.

"Harry," he cried, "I was mad just now. I thank you. You saved me from the brand of Cain. I shall not forget."

And he looked fearfully at his hands, as though his diseased fancy saw them covered with blood.

Henry advanced, and, kneeling, raised the trembling fingers to his lips.

"I would I were your brother, Sire," he replied.

Charles's gaze wandered from the dark, bent head to his sister, who stood smiling near. "Why, so you are," he cried heartily, "is he not, little Margot? My brother Harry, the truest of the name, I wot. Come, we'll drink on it. Bring wine there. Wine, wine. You'll drink with me, Harry?"

"You honour me, Sire. See, you are yourself again. There is more wisdom in a full cup than in all Ruggieri's ravings."

"Of course there is, and to-morrow Trois Échelles shall cast my horoscope, and tell me in truth how many

years I have to reign. Very many . . . very many . . . do you not think so, Harry ? ”

“ May Heaven grant it, Sire. We will drink to your long and prosperous life, and confusion on all false prophets.”

Charles laughed, slipping his hand through his brother-in-law’s arm in friendliest fashion.

Meantime Marguerite had stolen to her mother’s side.

“ Mother,” she whispered softly, “ he loves me, he loves me. I shall not need your potion now.”

Catherine started, looking curiously into her daughter’s flushed and happy face.

Was this Béarnais a magician, that he could so twist people—man or woman, King or wife, to his will, thus ever to thwart her ?

But she was a clever woman—the Queen-Mother of France—and her smile was of the kindest as she patted Marguerite’s cheek.

“ Give it to him, child,” she said gently ; “ it will make you secure. Besides, it will please him if you fill his cup yourself.”

Marguerite curtseyed.

“ I’ll do so, Madame,” she replied gaily. “ He cannot love me too much.”

And she could even smile on poor Madame de Sauve, who stood, red-eyed, in the background. The Queen-Mother had a sharp tongue when any of her ladies failed in their duties, and Charlotte should have remained to comfort the King of Navarre, instead of leaving the task to his wife.

As Marguerite turned away Catherine beckoned Marie Belleforêt to her side. The young girl approached trembling, to her the Queen-Mother's eyes possessed the fascination of the snake.

"Well, what did you learn?" asked Catherine sharply. The evening's events had not improved her temper.

"Nothing, Madame," replied Marie humbly.

Catherine's eyes narrowed, her right hand played with the tassel depending from her wide sleeve. "Take care," she whispered, "if you deceive me . . ."

Marie shuddered, for there were many oubliettes in the Louvre, and the tale was still whispered amongst the Queen's ladies of poor Gabrielle de la Marais, who had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from their midst, and who, it was said, had died because she had failed to carry a message with which the Medici had entrusted her to the Duc de Guise.

"The Queen of Navarre," faltered Mademoiselle Belleforêt, divided between fear of the oubliette and love of her mistress. Catherine's hand closed tightly on the girl's round, white arm.

"Yes,—well?"

It was all Marie could do not to scream aloud as the cruel nails were driven sharply into her soft flesh.

"She sent a ribbon to the Duc de Guise," she whispered, "and the one word, 'To-night.'"

Catherine let go the arm.

"To-night," she murmured thoughtfully, "to-night. A strange message."

A burst of laughter from Charles attracted her attention even as she pondered. The King had recovered his spirits.

"Come," he cried boisterously, "drink, Harry, drink, and we'll laugh at omens. Give me good wine. I feel I could live for ever."

Marie Belleforêt was startled by her mistress's voice in her ear.

"Find the Duc de Guise," whispered Marguerite hurriedly, "ask for my ribbon back, and say, 'Never'"

The eyes of the young girl met those of the Princess. Marie Belleforêt smiled.

"I go, Madame," she said joyfully.

Marguerite watched the slender rose-coloured figure disappear quickly from sight, then turned with a glad light in her dark eyes towards her husband.

Charles was already drinking thirstily, and Henry was about to fill his goblet from a flagon of choice Burgundy which a servant handed him, when Marguerite approached his side.

"Sire," she whispered, "may I not pour it for you?"

Henry turned swiftly, to meet the sparkle in happy eyes.

"A loving cup!" he exclaimed, bowing gracefully. "I shall out-Jove the gods with such a Hebe, ma mie."

Marguerite blushed. "It was my mother thought it my duty," she said, with a demure little curtsy, and turned from his eager gaze, colouring still more

rosily as she quickly drew forth the tiny phial her mother had given her, and poured the contents into the goblet.

"Your mother?" Henry asked, and shot a glance towards Catherine, who was talking to the Prince de Condé. It would have needed a close observer to notice the sharp, nervous glances she cast from under her veiled lids from time to time at the distant group.

"I've filled it with heart's happiness to the brim," whispered Marguerite.

The suspicion faded from her husband's face, and his laugh was that of a merry boy. "Then, sweet," he cried, "I'll drain it to the very dregs."

And he raised the cup high.

"Why, Margot," laughed King Charles, "I never saw you look so beautiful; your eyes are stars."

Marguerite curtsied low.

"Sire," she said simply, "you have made me happy."

Charles sighed enviously.

"You're a lucky fellow, Harry," he said.

"I would not change places even with you, Sire," was the quick reply. "Ladies of the Court, and gentlemen all, I give you a toast—My white star with the heart of gold, my Marguerite of Marguerites."

A moment's pause. Then the answer rang out—"The Queen of Navarre."

Catherine's hand clasped her side as though a sudden pain had stabbed her. Yet she smiled. "At last,"

she whispered to herself, "I have succeeded. The Béarnais will never be King of France."

But she averted her eyes from those who stood in the centre of the room.

Yet Henry of Navarre still stood with the goblet ready to his lips, and Marguerite by his side, her face suffused with happy blushes.

"What a wonderful stone, Sire," she cried, and arrested the draught which Henry was about to take by touching his finger.

Henry smiled, pausing to glance down at the ring.

"Aye, like you, Margot," he replied, "it has a heart of gold."

"Of gold?" she repeated, gazing, as though fascinated, at the gleaming opal. "Nay, look, it turns green, Harry."

Instantly Henry lowered his goblet, whilst he, in his turn, looked curiously at Ruggieri's gift.

"Why, so it is," said he, and glanced from the Queen-Mother to his wife, his eyes as hard as flints.

"So it is," he repeated slowly, and again his glance was turned to Catherine's face; the latter was very white, but her expression sphinx-like, as usual.

"Won't you drink first, Margot?" he added slowly, and the suspicion was masked in his eyes by a smile. "It is our loving-cup."

"Our loving-cup—yes," said she, with all the frank innocence of a child, and took the goblet.

"To my husband!" she cried, and lingered on the last word, seeking response to her tender look.

But Henry watched Queen Catherine.

The latter had turned livid, her eyes wild with alarm ; twice her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

A white hand, holding a golden goblet, was raised high, as Marguerite repeated her toast—she was fain to catch her husband's smile.

"Margot !" cried Catherine feebly.

But Marguerite was listening for the sound of another voice.

The cup, with its purple wine, was raised to rosy lips, but, ere it touched them, Henry stepped quickly forward, stumbling against some unseen obstacle and lurching against his wife. To save himself he caught the up-raised arm, and the wine, tilting over, was emptied upon the floor, splashing against the blue satin of Marguerite's gown and Henry's buckled shoes.

"Your pardon, ma mie," he cried, recovering himself. "See"—he turned with a meaning smile to de Mouhy standing by—"my wife—just saved me. Alas, Margot, what a clumsy Béarnais you have married."

He laughed as he spoke, pressing her hand, but his eyes were on the Queen-Mother, who had sunk half-fainting into a chair. "Your goblet, de Mouhy," he cried ; "I'll not be robbed of my toast. My Marguerite of Marguerites."

His hand was steady as he stretched it forth, and none noted how de Mouhy's shook as he presented the glass to his master.

"My Marguerite," laughed Harry again, and drained the wine to the last dregs. The opal in his ring glowed

more redly now than the torchlight, and Marguerite, looking this new, strange lover of hers in the face, wondered at the exultation in his eyes.

“ Yet, for all his craft, I have vowed that the Béarnais shall die to-night,” murmured Catherine to herself; but, nevertheless, she shivered as though the winds blew chill from the mountains on a winter’s night.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN MOMENTS FLY

THE Queen of Navarre was weary ; she withdrew early to her own apartments. But if she courted repose, it was to be denied her for the present. Hardly had she reached her room than the Demoiselle Louise de Pontreac came to request her to wait instantly upon the Queen-Mother, who, with her elder daughter, Claude, Duchess of Lorraine, had also retired from the Chamber, leaving Charles to play primero with his gentlemen ; for Charles—who loved excitement in any form—was a born gambler, and often sat up half the night dicing or playing his favourite game of primero with de Rochefoucauld, Tavannes, Condé, and others whose tastes coincided with his own—or who pretended they did—which was enough for royalty.

Marguerite pouted a little when her mother's message reached her. Although far less afraid of Catherine than was her sister Claude, she did not look forward to a close cross-examination as to her new relations with her husband.

The knowledge that she was but a pawn in a deep and subtle game of state-craft and intrigue was very galling to the high-spirited young Princess, who,

although not yet twenty, was of the opinion that she could manage her own affairs sufficiently well without maternal assistance.

But it could not be helped. Flat refusal to obey her mother's command was too bold a step even for Marguerite to dare to take, so, with a few grumbling words and injunctions to Marie to await her return in her tiring-room, she followed Louise de Pontreac down the long corridors which separated the apartments of the two Queens.

It had been an exciting evening—even to little Marie Belleforêt—although the latter but very dimly understood the intricate moves in the puzzling game carried on by those around her. But still there had been excitement. To begin with, Monsieur de Mouhy,—then the ribbon to the Duc de Guise,—Marie frowned a little over that memory, for she did not like the saturnine young noble, who reminded her of the devil, for all his handsome face and popularity,—the devil, she recalled, was also very popular with some—but not with those like Monsieur de Mouhy. Ah! that Monsieur de Mouhy again; how tiresome that he should always be in her thoughts, and yet how glad she had been of the pressure of those strong fingers when Ruggeri had frightened them all with his magic; and the King—ah, the King!—again Marie shuddered. She did not love Monsieur d'Anjou, but she had not wished to see him killed. How brave and gallant the King of Navarre had been, and what a mistake the Court ladies had made when they said that the Gascons

were all boors—there were others beside the King of Navarre who could put the fine courtiers of the Louvre to shame; for instance, M. de Rochefoucauld, and . . . and Monsieur de Mouhy. Bah! again Monsieur de Mouhy, and she had vowed to banish him from her thoughts! Yet why should she? He was brave and true, this Huguenot soldier who had looked down into her heart, yes! so much farther down than that hateful Antoine de Varais, whom once—very long ago—she had thought tolerable enough to flirt with. Now she hated him almost—if not quite—if not more than—Monsieur de Guise, his master.

All these thoughts made little Marie restless. She walked up and down the room, surveyed herself in the long mirror, peeped into the Queen's bedroom, which lay beyond the one in which she waited, yawned, looked at the clock, and heartily wished her mistress would come, and that they might go to bed.

The hours would pass so much more quickly in sleep, and she longed for the next morning—she did not tell herself why.

But Marguerite did not come, and Marie yawned and wished in vain, since too much of one's own company, following upon an evening of excitement, is a swift breeder of ennui.

How hot it was! She would open the window and look out. The stars were shining overhead. Those glittering stars. Some one had likened them to her eyes, and the simile from some one's lips did not sound

at all like the stereotyped extravagances to which she was so accustomed.

With two round, white elbows resting on the window-ledge she was indulging in a vaguely delightful dream, and so never heard the soft opening of the outer door, nor the tiptoeing of big feet across the carpet, though she gave a little scream of fear as some one from behind caught her in his arms and kissed her on the lips. The scream, sealed close on parted lips ere half uttered, changed from one of fear to pouting mirth as she saw that the intruder was no other than Arthur de Mouhy himself.

Yet, when he released her, she fell to scolding him to save herself from embarrassment.

"Clumsy," she cried, "I might have fallen out of the window, and your little Marie would have been nothing but a heap of bones."

De Mouhy looked as guilty as a naughty urchin caught pilfering. Then, with a deprecating arm slid half around her waist, he leant to look out.

"Yes," he sighed, "it would have been a fearsome drop." His face brightened. "But you'll laugh at precipices when you come to Gascony with me."

Marie was toying with the embroidered pouch at her girdle.

"I'm not sure I'll go to Gascony with you," she whispered.

But to-night de Mouhy was in bolder mood, having, it seemed, learnt a lesson in women's ways, thus deeming it wise to cast diffidence to the winds.

"Oh, but you will," he retorted confidently, as he twirled his dark moustachioes at a great rate. "You were looking out of the window for me then."

Mademoiselle Marie's indignation made a fine show.

"I wasn't," she cried hotly. "It's—it's too dark, and you're a big, ugly——" she stopped, having perhaps lost breath with so much heat, or—fearing a falsehood to be confessed later on—thinking it wiser to change the conversation.

"How fine you look," she cried, and pretended anger gave way to laughing raillery.

The big, simple-hearted soldier was delighted. To wear fine clothes and lack for admiration is a bitter pill for any, especially when the fine clothes prove to be the exception to the rule.

"Do you like them?" he demanded, and twirled round upon his heel for further criticism.

Marie clapped her hands as she surveyed the tall figure in its pourpoint of brown velvet and orange-coloured pardessus.

He certainly was not ugly after all, this Huguenot lover of hers, with his lean, dark face and honest hazel eyes.

"*Like* them!" she cried, her fair head a little on one side, and her lips pursed with a critical air. "Why, the King doesn't look so grand! Put on your hat, Monsieur!"

It seemed so natural for this golden-haired child to command and the big, stern-faced soldier meekly to obey.

De Mouhy put on his hat, a flat cap of brown velvet, with an orange feather in it.

But Marie was not satisfied.

"Not like that," she said, and tiptoed to bend it to a rakish angle. "So," she said, laughing at his self-conscious pleasure. "And your sash thus. Now you are a courtier."

She dropped him a curtsey with demure hands folded before her. "Haven't you anything for me to-day?"

It was an audacious invitation, but de Mouhy was learning.

"Why, yes," said he, and, stepping forward, kissed her pouting lips.

She did not struggle this time, but backed a little beyond his reach, with face puckered into a frown.

"What's that?" she demanded severely, "that scent? It's Flowers of Provence. I knew it, Monsieur! You have been deceiving me." She turned half from him as she spoke, and raised a tiny piece of cambric as though to wipe aside a tear.

De Mouhy was horror-stricken.

"Deceiving you?" he gasped. "Marie, I swear——"

Mademoiselle Belleforêt's voice was strangely calm for that of a weeping damsel as she replied—

"Don't swear. You're a Huguenot."

"But, Marie."

The angry little beauty wheeled round on him, her blue eyes quite dry, but sparkling with displeasure. "Flowers of Provence!" she cried. "Did you think

I should not remember that it is la belle Dayole's scent? Oh—oh! Now—now—I know why you have put on those fine feathers!”

De Mouhy opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“Of course you do,” he said simply. “I put them on to please you.”

Marie laughed contemptuously.

“To please *me*,” she retorted, drawing herself up with great dignity. “I suppose, Monsieur, it was to please me that la belle Dayole gave you her scent. Fool! She wanted all the Court to know that she had captured you, though Heaven knows why—you are not much to look at,” and she tossed her head with an air of supreme indifference.

“Marie,” faltered de Mouhy anxiously, “Marie, I swear to you I bought it at Rêné's.”

“Bought it at Rêné's indeed! A likely tale! What have *you* to do with scent?”

“You first made me use it,” he murmured reproachfully. “I bought it only for you.”

If a dimple flickered in the round cheek of Mademoiselle Belleforêt it was sternly repressed.

“For me?” she scoffed. “I—I hate it . . . in a man—it's only fit for fops and exquisites. I like a soldier.”

“Mademoiselle! . . .”

“Come here.”

De Mouhy approached with evident nervousness. Was it possible that she was really angry,—really jealous?

The dimple struggled into life in spite of vigorous efforts.

"Don't look so frightened," Mademoiselle condescended to say. "I shan't bite you, booby."

And, with quick fingers she untied the sash, and flung it off. The long ribbon around his neck followed, then there was more tiptoeing to uncurl the dark moustachioes—a trying operation that last with two blue stars within measurable distance of his own, and rosy lips alluringly close, so close that their owner's breath fanned his cheek. But de Mouhy was feeling as horribly guilty as a perfectly innocent man can do at times, and submitted without daring to take advantage of a mute, half-veiled invitation.

"Now your hat," said Marie, a little breathlessly, and the orange feather was soon tossed into a corner with the rest of de Mouhy's gay trappings.

"Put it on," she nodded. "No, not like that. Straight, Monsieur, straight. Té, I might have known how you would conduct yourself with such a master."

"But, Marie."

The poor fellow found pleadings were vain. Mademoiselle Belleforêt, like other maidens before and since, preferred to talk down a lover who was inclined to argue.

"Spare your protestations," she said, with a fine imitation of outraged propriety. "I'll protect you from the Court ladies in future. Be warned by your master's example. They say he had a narrow escape to-day."

De Mouhy's expression changed from that of the irresolute lover to that of alert soldier. Navarre's watch-dog had need of ears and eyes as well as sword.

"What tale runs at Court?" he said carelessly, yet with his eyes on the girl's face.

"The courtiers say that Catherine tried to poison Henry, and that he was saved by a magic ring."

"Then the courtiers lie."

Marie looked up in surprise; she was forgetting her rôle now that the conversation had taken so serious a turn.

"Why, wasn't the cup poisoned?" she asked.

"Aye, the cup was poisoned, but Henry was saved by his own wits. Why did he offer it to Margot? To see if Catherine would start!"

"And then he laughed . . . Oh! I begin to understand your Henry of Navarre."

"The Queen-Mother begins to understand him too. She fears him, but if she can only stir up strife between him and Queen Margot, she will be able to destroy him."

"He will deserve it, I shall not pity him," declared Mademoiselle Belleforêt, her piquante face puckered in disdain.

"I rise or fall with him, his death means mine," de Mouhy replied firmly.

The colour fled from the girl's cheeks.

"His . . . death . . . means . . . yours?" she faltered.

"Aye," nodded de Mouhy, "and of all of our religion. Do you not understand? This marriage is our only safeguard."

Marie's hands were wrung together in sudden agony, all desire for acting or coquetry fled before the terrible irony of reality.

"What?" she cried piteously. "Oh, what have I done? I have ruined you—ruined you!"

De Mouhy stepped hastily to her side, catching one white hand in his.

"Ruined me?" he questioned, though his thoughts were not of himself at all. "What do you mean, Marie?"

He spoke tenderly, as one might to a frightened child, and indeed she was little more. The big blue eyes were swimming in tears as she raised them to his.

"Arthur, Arthur, forgive me," she sobbed. "She frightened me, and looked at me like a snake, and—and when she does that I can't help myself. I didn't know it would hurt you."

De Mouhy's grasp on her arm tightened.

"What have you done?" he whispered.

The golden head drooped.

"Marguerite sent me with a ribbon to the Duc de Guise," she whispered, "with the one word, 'To-night.'"

Involuntarily de Mouhy dropped the little hand he clasped.

"Morbleu!" he muttered. "Then she *is* in the plot; after all! The Guise sent for! Well, I'm not surprised—she is Catherine's daughter—and a true Valois, false as the rest of the brood."

Marie's pretty cheeks flamed in sudden resentment.

"No, no," she replied. "She's my mistress; I'll not have her miscalled. But . . . but I told Catherine. Oh, what can we do?"

She sobbed out the last words with all the helplessness of a child, all the terror of a woman who sees sudden danger looming in the path of the man she loves.

De Mouhy's brows were knit.

"Stop the Guise," he said shortly. "No—let him come. Henry will kill him."

"That is what Catherine wants—then the Parisians would kill you all. No, the Guise mustn't come; but how can we stop him? I searched for him. He was nowhere to be found. My mistress sent for her ribbon back, but he had gone."

"Let him come," growled de Mouhy. "I'll meet him at the door, and kill him with my own hand."

But the suggestion only terrified Marie the more. In despair she flung herself into her lover's arms.

"No, no, Arthur," she cried passionately. "You must not; you are not of the blood, they would break you on the wheel. Oh, it would kill me."

He took her tear-stained face between his hands, smiling as her eyes looked up into his with glittering drops still weighing down the long, curling lashes.

"My——" he whispered, and broke off suddenly.

In the doorway stood Catherine de Medici.

CHAPTER XVIII

"WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S——"

"COME here, child," commanded Catherine in her coldest tones, as the door closed on de Mouhy's retreating form.

Marie obeyed, trembling with recent emotion and present fear. The Queen-Mother's dark eyes were upon her face.

"You are too familiar with this heretic!" she said slowly.

Marie's hands moved restlessly as though she were trying to beat off the fascination of that mesmeric glance.

"I . . . I did but obey Your Majesty's instructions," she replied.

Catherine leant forward eagerly.

"Well?" she demanded. "What have you learnt?"

"Some one—some one must have warned him . . . he will tell nothing," said the girl, but her lips quivered.

"Has the King of Navarre been to say good night yet? I believe it is his custom."

"Always, Madame, but he has not yet come."

"We will await him; the Queen of Navarre is ill and cannot see him to-night."

Marie curtsied.

"See that the fire be lighted," added the Queen-Mother.

Fear gave place to astonishment in Marie's eyes.

"The fire, Madame? But it is August."

And she drew her breath deeply, for truly the heat was oppressive.

"The nights are fresh," replied Catherine calmly, "and the Queen is fragile. Do you hear me, child?"

There was no mistaking the command in those measured tones. Again Marie curtsied and left the apartment, quickly returning with a servant, who kindled the fire.

When they were once more alone Catherine spoke, her eyes fixed meditatively on the thin wreath of smoke that curled upwards amongst the logs like some slender snake-wraith.

"There is no word from the Duc de Guise?" she asked, but Marie fancied she could detect a faint smile playing about the firm lips.

"No, Madame," she answered.

"Good," murmured Catherine, and the soft purring of her voice told of a contented spirit within. "He will come. Henry and he will meet."

Marie stood silent, her heart beating fast. Ah! what had she done? What had she done?

"You have not mentioned this to a soul?" was the next sudden question, whilst once more the feline look shone in the eyes turned keenly upon the young girl.

"No, Madame, no," whispered Marie, and hid her trembling hands within her wide sleeves.

Catherine's eyes did not immediately relinquish their hold.

"If my women speak," she said, and there was a note of threatening in the purring voice, "I have an *oubliette* where they may talk all day and none will listen. There have been some who have proved the truth of this. You understand, child?"

Marie swayed forward a little. "Yes, Madame, yes," she said faintly, and only the memory of a man's tender eyes and the strong clasp of his arms kept her from full confession. Fortunately for her—and for others—Catherine's lynx eyes had caught sight of a small packet on the table.

"What's this?" she asked curiously.

"It is for the King of Navarre," replied Marie, with a sigh of relief.

"For the King of Navarre?"

A white, shapely hand, with long taper fingers, was stretched towards the packet; but just then the door was flung open without ceremony, and Henry of Navarre entered, humming gaily one of the couplets which a wag of the Court had strung together in praise of the Prince de Condé—

"Ce petit homme si gentil,
Qui toujours chante et toujours rit,
Toujours . . ."

He had unbuckled his sword and flung it on the table as he sang, but broke off abruptly in the midst of his

rhyme as Catherine rose from her seat in the shadow of the room.

"Ah! mother, this is kind of you," he exclaimed, bowing low over her hand. "Where is Margot?" His keen eye swept the room at a glance.

"She is not well," replied Catherine suavely, "so I kept her in my apartments with her sister until she retires."

Henry affected immediate concern.

"Not well? I must go to her," he exclaimed. "If she is ill I should be by her side," and he turned to the door.

But Catherine restrained him.

"No, stay," she said. "It is but a passing spell. The excitement of the evening was too much for her. She is unstrung."

Henry laughed.

"It certainly was an exciting evening," he said meaningly, and hummed over the same lines—

*"Ce petit homme si gentil,
Qui toujours chante et toujours rit,
Toujours caresse sa mignonne,
Dieu gard' de mal, le petit homme."*

"You are merry, my son," purred Catherine.

"As a bird in a bower," chuckled Henry, "or a cat with cream, Madame, or as a donkey with a bunch of mistletoe." He threw back his dark head laughing. "Ha, Marie," he added, turning to his wife's attendant, "a fire in August?"

Marie curtsied demurely.

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"The Queen-Mother ordered it, Sire."

Henry's smile was even more whimsical than its wont.

"Ventre Ste. Gris! it was thoughtful of you, mother. You know I am a Southerner, cradled in the sun, and how the north air chills my very bones! I thank you, mother."

If his bow were mocking as he spoke, Catherine did not appear to notice it; she was watching the many snake-wraiths that curled and danced amidst the crackling logs.

"I must seek Margot, mother," added Henry, following the direction of her gaze with a shrewd glance.

Catherine started.

"Nay," she said anxiously, "a minute, Henry." She turned to Marie. "You may go, child," she added.

But Henry stepped forward with a gesture of dissent.

"No, stay, Marie," he commanded.

Catherine stared as though she could scarcely believe her ears.

"*Henry!*" she exclaimed severely.

The King of Navarre met her eyes and laughed. "You take my wife from me," he protested. "At least leave me her maid."

The Queen-Mother forced an indulgent smile.

"The King jests," she cried. "Go, child."

Henry frowned.

"The King is in earnest. Child, remain."

Marie looked from one to the other, frightened and uncertain.

"Madame," she whispered, curtsying, "am I to stay?"

"Why not?" demanded Henry.

"As you will, why not?" replied Catherine, turning away with a shrug of her shoulders.

Henry stood thoughtful a moment, drumming his fingers against the hilt of the sword which lay on the table.

"Why am I so honoured to-night?" he asked at length, having apparently arrived at a conclusion.

"Why would you keep me, Madame?"

The inquiry in his tone was edged with a deeper note of suspicion.

Catherine laid her hand on his sleeve caressingly.

"Henry," she murmured, "if you would but trust me once."

Her dark eyes, so like, and yet so wholly unlike, Marguerite's, looked a full moment into his.

Henry was smiling as he made reply.

"I should never mistrust you again—I feel it, Madame," he replied with emphasis.

The black eyes seemed to narrow, as though the soul behind them longed to pierce into the depths of his. He met them, smiling still, his nose drawn down in that peculiar trick, as though to meet his chin.

"Are you and Margot happy?" asked Catherine, regardless of Marie's presence. "I am your mother now, Henry."

"WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S——" 181

"I have not complained," smiled Henry. "Has Margot?"

"No . . . but . . ."

It was strange for the Medici to be at a loss for a word, but somehow those grey eyes daunted her.

Was not this the first man to pit himself against her in duplicity?

"Madame," Henry interrupted civilly, "she is the sweetest woman in the world, and you—you—are her mother," and he raised Catherine's hand to his lips. The Queen-Mother shivered a little as she moved away.

Henry at the same moment caught sight of the packet on the table, and his expression changed. "Ah! for me," he said. "Will you permit me, Madame?"

Catherine had advanced to the fire, which was burning more brightly.

"Do not mind me," she replied amiably. "I am your mother now." She seemed anxious to impress him with this last fact.

Already Henry had torn the outer covering from the parcel, and was reading the slip of parchment fastened to an inner packet.

It was from Ruggieri.

"If the heat be too much for you, this will revive you," was written.

Henry understood.

Looking up, he saw Catherine in the act of sprinkling some powder amongst the burning logs.

The action seemed to amuse him, for he whistled gaily as he slipped Ruggieri's packet within his velvet

pourpoint. It was not, however, a lively air, being that which the Parisian mob had found so popular lately—"The Huguenots shall die."

Marie, who had been standing by the window, turned to look at him. She did not understand at all what was happening. Catherine turned too, with a little start, as she saw those hawk-like eyes upon her. But she covered a momentary nervousness with a laugh. "Another letter enclosing a petition," she said, flinging some crumpled pieces of paper into the fire. "Yours, I trust, was more pleasant."

Henry yawned.

"From my falconer—he has a new bird for me to fly."

Catherine passed her hand across her forehead, she was very white.

"Good night, Henry," she said abruptly.

Henry looked up in well-feigned astonishment. "Must you go? You keep me here, and now you would leave me, mother?"

"Since you have nothing to tell me," smiled Catherine. "I am glad all is well."

"Permit me to accompany you," said Henry gallantly, offering her his hand in accordance with the custom of the day.

But Catherine shook her head.

"Nay, stay here—my maids wait without."

"I will walk with you to them," he persisted.

"No," said Catherine, frowning. "I forbid it. The world talks too much of you and my maids."

Henry shrugged his shoulders.

"The world thinks me too fortunate," he replied.

"The Queen might return," added Catherine, trying to withdraw her hand.

"Your Majesty forgets she is not well," put in Henry slyly.

Catherine gave an impatient little sigh, and cast an anxious glance towards the fire. The flames leapt merrily over the logs, which spat and crackled as though some mocking fiend laughed up his sleeve at the two standing there; but, besides the flames, there appeared to be new smoke-wraiths, bluer, more slender, than the first curling wreaths of smoke.

"Stay with me, Madame," pleaded Henry affectionately, "until Margot comes."

Catherine's lips twitched, but her eyes were still calm.

"I would," she replied, "but . . . but . . . the King is coming to see you alone."

"He will have the greater happiness of seeing his mother," was the immediate response.

Catherine looked up into the smiling grey eyes with something very like fear in her own. Did he suspect? Could he have learnt her secret? Ah! she was afraid of this Béarnais. Surely he was a sorcerer himself, so to outwit her on every side.

"I must be gone," she said abruptly.

Henry bowed.

He was always bowing and laughing, this merry Gascon monarch.

"Not without me, Madame," he replied. "I'll not

be so ungallant. See how a Gascon clings to a woman—even his wife's mother."

Catherine had no time to resent the mockery in the gay voice. Already the blue snakes of writhing smoke began to curl upwards and outwards into the apartment.

"Quick, then, Henry," she said, yielding at length to necessity and his strange importunity; "show me the way, if you will."

The smoke was already filling the room as the door closed behind the two. Marie Belleforêt was alone; her mistress had told her to await her here.

Vaguely she wished that mistress would come, she was growing so sleepy, so tired. How the walls seemed to reel and sway around her, as though they would fall and crush her to the earth. How stifling this smoke was, too; the wood must have been damp; she would open the window, or her mistress would suffocate.

With the thought she rose unsteadily. How very tired she was, and why did everything swim before her eyes? She made one staggering step forward, and drew in a gasping breath; the ruff round her throat was choking her. With shaking fingers she tore it off and drew in another breath. The smoke was even more stifling than the ruff. She would faint before she reached the windows. Another step forward, and then she stumbled, swayed giddily, and, with one hand clasping her head, fell backwards in a corner of the room.

The logs crackled gleefully—was it the laughter of fiends, or of Catherine de Medici? Nay! rather that of Henry of Navarre!

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT TWO KINGS PLANNED

ALONG the narrow cornice which ran round the outer building of the Louvre crept the dark figure of a man. Had it been possible for any to see him from below it would have appeared that he stood poised in mid air against a sheer wall, but the curtain of night hid him from view, and still on he crept, flattening himself against the palace wall, as you may have seen a sea-bird breast the white cliffs, and, as he advanced, his stockinged feet found and clung to the slender foothold till he reached a window.

Now came the difficulty ; for a moment the climber swayed, whilst one hand groped for the fastening.

The night breeze stirred the black curls of his hair, and swept on moaning and sighing, as though some lost spirit clamoured too for the entrance he sought.

The window creaked and swung open—inwards. The man leapt quickly inside.

The room was warm—very warm—a clear fire of burning logs crackled on the hearth, candles flickered in their brackets on the walls.

Henry of Navarre smiled and advanced. The room was empty, but some one was knocking without.

Some one who was evidently in a hurry. The King of Navarre hastened across the room and opened the door.

The King of France entered.

The draught from the window caused the candles to flicker still more furiously. Charles looked in astonishment from the window to his brother-in-law.

Henry bowed, and the King of France laughed.

"Do you always enter through the window, Harry?" he asked.

"Not in my own house, Sire," was the gay response.

"Mort de tous les diables! You Gascons are strange creatures. Did you walk along that cornice? Why! a cat would scarce find room. It is dark, too."

"A cat, Sire, could not follow a chamois, a Gascon must. *Ventre Ste. Gris! Marie! Marie!*" As he spoke Henry's restless eyes had spied the little rose-coloured figure lying huddled in the corner, and he sprang forward with an exclamation of horror.

The poor girl was quite unconscious, with livid lines about her mouth and nostrils. In deep anxiety Henry raised the fair head.

"She has fainted," said Charles. "Call for wine."

But already Henry was fumbling for a tiny packet hidden within his doublet, his conscience sorely smiting him that he could have forgotten this poor child, whilst himself escaping from danger.

"Nay, Sire," said he, "I—I have something here that will revive her."

And he unfastened the stopper of the phial Ruggieri had sent him.

"How close the room is," said Charles, going to the window. "Peste! No wonder she found it too warm."

Henry had succeeded by this time in pouring a few drops of elixir between Marie's closed lips.

"Ventre Ste. Gris!" he muttered, as he saw the white lids flutter. "I was but just in time."

Marie opened her eyes, wondering at first, whilst her breath came in quick gasps. "Sire!" she whispered, blushing as she became aware of the presence of the two Kings, and she strove to rise.

"You must let me assist you, Marie," said Henry with a smile, as he lifted her to her feet. "It is a pity *de Mouhy* is not here."

Marie blushed still more rosily. She was recovering quickly now. "Forgive me, Sire," she whispered. "I—I became dizzy. It must have been the heat."

"Margot must be mad," exclaimed Charles irritably. "A fire in August! and a night like this."

Henry smiled as he turned from Marie and approached the King's side.

"Yes, Sire," he replied drily. "See, the . . . the *heat* has killed all the flies."

And he brushed a number of tiny black bodies into a significant heap.

Charles stared and frowned.

"But, Harry," he said sharply, "what joke is this?"

"None of mine, Sire," was the quick reply. "I never play with fire. Ask your mother, Sire—or—better still—ask no one."

The eyes of the two young monarchs met. Charles understood.

"Ah," he said, and turned abruptly to Marie. "You are better, Mademoiselle?" he asked.

Marie curtsied.

"Yes, thank you, Sire."

"You may retire," said the King. And Marie, only too thankful for the permission, made her escape.

Charles, it would seem, was in a restless mood. Whatever he had come to say he evidently found hard to get out. To cover his confusion he wandered aimlessly about till his eye lighted on the sword which lay on the table.

"This is a good blade, Harry," he said.

Henry had been watching his brother-in-law closely. Now he smiled his ever-ready smile. "I know none better," he replied.

"And you have a good wrist, Harry, and a nerve that will not fail?"

Henry shrugged his shoulders.

"I fence indifferent well," he replied; "for the rest, I never allow myself to be nervous."

"Well said! Peste! You have my blood in your veins; and for all you're a damned Huguenot, I like you, Harry."

"And in spite of your blood, and for all you're a damned Catholic, I like you, Charles."

Charles frowned, then burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! The Guise is a good blade, but he's impetuous, Harry. He has never been taught to wait. Now, St. Luc . . ."

Henry yawned.

"Your Majesty didn't honour me with your company to discuss swordsmanship," he said, seating himself on the window-ledge.

"No; the truth is, Harry, I'm worried about you. I don't think Margot treats you fairly."

Henry raised his eyebrows.

"Sire, you yourself have not been more gracious," he replied.

"Tut, Harry, you cannot deceive me. I am the King, and I know. She was a part of the treaty. You married her because she was a Princess of France."

"Had she been dowerless I would have asked no other wife."

"Peste, man, be serious. These protestations are all very well for the crowd, but we can speak to each other plainly."

"Do I not speak plainly, Sire? Look into my eyes. You will see Margot in them, if you read my soul. I swear I have no other love."

Charles looked keenly into the dark swarthy face of the young Béarnais. The grey eyes were true.

"Morableu! He means it," he muttered. "You love her, Henry. On my soul, I'm sorry for you."

Henry drew out his comfit box, and leisurely selected a sweetmeat.

"Sorry for me, Sire?"

"Yes, sorry for you. You're a good fellow, Harry, but you could hardly expect that Margot could love you."

Henry slowly crunched a sugar-plum between his strong white teeth.

"Thank you, Sire; and why not?" he demanded.

"She was forced into this marriage against her will. She has been cradled in compliments and the Court. You're a soldier, a hunter, a man . . . now the Guise . . ."

Henry jumped down from his seat, and thrust the comfit box into his pocket.

"Damn the Guise!" he cried. "I tell you she loves me."

"She loves you?" echoed Charles in surprise.

"Don't be a fool, Harry!"

"She loves me, Sire, my life on it!"

Charles frowned.

"Peste! Harry, those maids of my mother's have turned your head. You're too simple for the Court."

Henry bowed.

"I am, Sire, I am simple enough to trust my lady's word."

"She tells you she loves you?"

"Herself, Sire."

"And I've always believed Margot," said Charles slowly, "although we've the same mother. Henry, she is deceiving you. This very night the Guise is to visit her here."

The grey eyes blazed, the dark line of moustache seemed to actually bristle with anger.

"It's a lie, Sire!" thundered Henry, and snatched his sword from the table. But Charles stood unmoved.

"Henry!" he said reproachfully.

The moment of passion passed as swiftly as it had come. In an instant Henry was kneeling. "Your pardon, Sire," he murmured hoarsely. "I forgot myself. She is my wife."

"She is my sister," replied Charles, "and if she forgets she is your wife, she shall not forget she is a Valois. As for the Guise! *Ventre de Pape!* He has humbled me often, but to-night I have him by the throat."

"I can't believe it, Sire; only to-day she told me she was all mine."

"Do you stay here to-night?"

Henry hesitated.

"No," he said at length.

Charles laughed.

"Then come with me, and we will prove it, Harry."

"Not to-night."

"Why not?"

"I told her that I would trust her."

"Trust her," sneered Charles. "You're mad! I tell you she's a Valois—her blood is cursed. Do I trust my brother and mother?" His voice rose shrilly. "If you were not a Bourbon too, Harry, should I trust you? Some day I'll open this vein"—and he bared his arm

to the elbow, pointing to the blue vein which stood out on it like a whipcord,—“and let my blood out drop by drop—I hate it so.”

“You are mistaken, Sire,” said Henry soothingly; “some one has lied to you.”

But Charles shook his head vehemently.

“No, no, my mother does not make mistakes, her spies serve her too well.”

“Your mother?” repeated Henry, and smiled.

“Sire,” he added, “it was she who put these suspicions into your brain. Now my soul tells me surely they are false. Sire, I’ll come with you.”

Charles’s shifty eyes grew cunning.

“And if the Guise be there?” quoth he.

Henry laid his hand on his sword-hilt. “I’ll kill him with this sword,” he replied simply.

A sudden fierce gleam of joy swept over Charles’s face.

“Good blade, good arm!” he chuckled. “I’ll second you, coz, kill him, kill him! Stick him in the throat, let the blood run! Ha, ha! it will be rare sport, Harry, the best sport. And after it I shall be King—King. When I ride through Paris they will cry my name—not that of Henry of Guise—our dear Guise. He will be dead—dead. Ha, ha!”

He laid a shaking hand on Navarre’s, and looked him in the face.

“If you fail, Harry,” he muttered, “I’ll kill him myself, do you hear? I’ll kill him myself.”

And his lips were foam-flecked with passion as he spoke.

CHAPTER XX

"THE QUEEN IS FALSE"

THE King of France had gone.

The King of Navarre remained behind. It was his turn now to be restless. Through the open window the night breeze stole into the room. But it could not cool the fever that burned just then in the young man's heart.

He paced up and down. This was Marguerite's room—his Marguerite's. Everything reminded him of her, suggested her presence, made his pulses leap with the love he bore her.

What had Charles said? That the Guise was coming? It was a lie—a lie!

He was standing now before her picture, looking up into the face which Clouet had been so fond of painting with its soft lines of young, glowing beauty, the mysteries shadowed beneath the sweeping lashes which half hid the black pools of her eyes.

"Margot, Margot," he whispered tenderly, and all doubt had faded from his own face as he gazed, "there's love in your eyes, sweetheart, and truth upon your lips. I would trust you, Margot, my wife, though all hell proclaimed you false."

The door opened with a clatter.

Surely it was no courtier who stumbled so clumsily over the violet velvet curtain with its embroidered fleur-de-lys ?

No courtier, indeed, but only plain Arthur de Mouhy, a gentleman of Gascony, so fresh to the ways of this same Court that his eyes were ablaze with honest indignation and scorn. He hated the sight of his master standing there beneath the picture of a smiling woman.

"Are you alone, Sire ?" he demanded abruptly.

Henry stretched tired arms above his head—they kept early hours in Gascony.

"Why, man, what's the matter ?" he asked. "Are the Catholics up ?" and he sat himself on the edge of the table, swinging one stockinged foot as he sang—

"Every street shall be a grave,
A corpse shall swim on every wave,
The Huguenots shall die."

"A pleasant song, de Mouhy, to accompany wedding bells. Catherine has a sense of humour. Come, out with your news,—is it the Catholics ?"

De Mouhy groaned. "The Catholics up ?" he repeated. "I would they were, Sire. Then we could fight and die with unstained honour, as our brothers died at Jarnac."

"Honour?" echoed Henry, more seriously. "Who calls our honour in question, de Mouhy ?"

"Sire, forgive me if I speak it, the words sting my tongue, but I must say them."

"Come, man," said Henry sternly, "out with them ! Don't make them worse by waiting."

De Mouhy averted his face. "Sire," he said in a constrained voice, "the Queen is deceiving you."

To his surprise Henry only flung back his head with a laugh.

"You too, de Mouhy," he gibed, "you too caught by this slander?"

"Sire, you laugh, but it is true."

"My poor de Mouhy ! Why don't you tell me that the Guise comes here to-night to keep tryst?"

De Mouhy started. "Sire, you know?"

"Of course ! and more. Don't you see through Catherine's trick ? Why, it's as clear as moonshine. Confess ! one of her women whispered the lying tale ?"

"It is true, Sire, it is true."

"Ventre Ste. Gris !" cried Henry, springing to the floor, and snatching his sword from its sheath, "You dare !"

"Ay !" replied de Mouhy stoutly, "with your sword against my heart, with death looking me in the face, I say it's true, Sire."

The two men were facing each other, eye to eye, but Henry's was the first to waver. Dropping his sword, he turned away.

"True ?" he groaned, "for Heaven's sake, don't say that ; say it is a lie, say . . . why ! I know not what you should say, for I will not believe it. Who told you, de Mouhy ?"

"Marie, Belleforêt."

Henry's laugh was forced. "Ha, ha! I knew it. Her mistress made her say it. Catherine frightened the girl, and she lied to you."

De Mouhy did not flinch, only his hazel eyes grew softer.

"She loves me, Sire, she would not lie to me."

Henry flung out his hands.

"And Marguerite loves me!" he cried.

De Mouhy's eyes fell. He guessed at the suffering which must underlie these words after he had spoken. Yet truth must be told.

"She sent her ribbon to the Duc de Guise by Marie; the message was 'To-night.'"

Henry's face was drawn with sudden grief. "To-night! and I thought she loved me. I thought that doubt was past. De Mouhy, de Mouhy, what shall I do?"

De Mouhy's eyes flashed. "Kill him, Sire," he cried; "kill him where he stands."

"I will, de Mouhy, I will, with this sword—as the King said. If Henry of Guise comes here to-night, he will not leave alive. Not all Lorraine shall save him."

Yet, even as he spoke, he sank into a chair, his sword clattering upon the floor, whilst his dark head was buried in his arms.

De Mouhy, standing by, cursed woman's perfidy very heartily, and that of Marguerite of Navarre more vehemently still.

That such a woman should bring sorrow to such a man!
There was a long silence, only broken by a man's

deep, sobbing breaths, between which de Mouhy could hear ever and anon the whisper of a name—“Margot, Margot, my love, all mine, and now not mine at all. Margot, Margot!”

Presently Henry rose, picking up his sword, and buckling it slowly on. His face was set and stern again—the moment for weakness had gone, as had the time for laughter. Yet his thoughts were busy. Taking up his hat he laid it down again, fingering the jewel which fastened the crimson feather into place.

“De Mouhy,” he muttered, “why did Catherine tell Charles to warn me against Margot?”

His brows knit over the question. But de Mouhy’s brain was not trained to subtle arguments, or fancies. He was soldier—not statesman—a fighter, not an intriguer.

“What matters it so you *are* warned, Sire,” he replied, “so that you know the worst?”

But Henry’s mind was already far set in a labyrinth of schemes and doubts.

“If I kill the Guise, what will Paris do?” he reflected aloud.

“Rise up in arms, massacre the Huguenots,” replied de Mouhy shortly.

Henry turned, with a gesture of despair. “My honour! My honour! So France must be drenched in blood, and half her best sons killed, that my honour may be avenged! Paris must rise . . . Coligny . . . Condé . . . and all our friends be slaughtered in their

beds because the Guise loves my wife ! I've lived and laughed with peril day by day for my country and my cause. My honour, my life, and Margot—what are all compared with France ? It is because my poor countrymen die, every hour, of famine, fire, and steel, that I am here ; shall I desert them now ? Oh ! what a fool I've been ! ”

“ You have been true,” replied de Mouhy, in a low, hard voice, “ it is she who has betrayed us.”

“ Silence ! ” thundered Henry, his grey eyes terrible. “ I'll not believe it, until my own eyes tell me so. But what a fool I've been ! I came here lightly to measure my young brains with Catherine's. I thought a Gascon might pit his wits against the devil himself, and what a trap I'm in ! ” And, tossing aside his hat, he paced up and down the room feverishly. De Mouhy watched him with sombre eyes.

“ A trap ? ” he muttered.

“ Aye, a trap. There are two things alone that Catherine fears—the Guise and Henry of Navarre. If I kill the Guise, the Catholics kill me, and both her foes are gone. The stars have lied, the Huguenots are lost,—and I tried my wits against hers, fool that I am ! ”

“ Let me kill him, Sire.”

“ That would not make the Catholics love me better.”

And again Henry paced the room lost in despairing thought. At last an idea seemed to have come to him, for he stopped suddenly.

“ De Mouhy ! ” he exclaimed, “ give me my mask.”

De Mouhy looked still more perplexed.

"Your mask, Sire?"

"My mask. And, de Mouhy, it's not every one who can climb like a cat or a Gascon; get me a ladder of rope,—la Rochefoucauld has one."

"Where shall I meet you, Sire?"

"In my rooms within the half-hour. I'll not take a sword; I'll not trust myself. Come, de Mouhy, my wife will be here, and I would not meet her now."

The King of Navarre was laughing as he drew down his velvet cap low over his brows. It was evident that he had an idea.

Perhaps Catherine would not find that the game was so easily won after all, although her adversary was nothing better than a raw lad of Gascony.

De Mouhy followed his master in surprise.

"You laugh, Sire," he ventured to say. But Henry stopped further questioning with a hearty clap on the back.

"Aye," he cried jovially, "as you will do, de Mouhy, when you see the King to-night."

CHAPTER XXI

THE GUISE'S WOOING

MARIE BELLEFORÊT was awaiting her mistress still—as she had been two hours ago. Oh! how weary she was, and how her eyelids drooped for lack of sleep! Would the Queen-Mother never have done talking? She could guess how Marguerite must be chafing. Supposing the Guise came *before* her return?

Her heart thumped in sudden terror as the door opened, and she could scarcely restrain the little cry of relief and joy that rose to her lips as she saw de Mouhy's dark face looking in.

"Arthur," she cried.

But just now de Mouhy had not even time for love-making. His master needed him.

"If the Guise comes to-night," he whispered hurriedly, "on no account admit him."

Marie tossed her pretty head. She had expected a lover when she saw him in the doorway, and was not minded to be thus cheated of a pleasant diversion. She had been bored into sleepiness waiting here alone.

"What will you give me?" she demanded, so saucily that de Mouhy could not resist the appeal.

Advancing from the door, which he left open in his hurry, he caught the little demoiselle up in his strong arms and kissed her. "That," said he, laughing into laughing eyes.

Certainly love is a great transformer, and de Mouhy was an apt pupil in the school of Eros.

The only thing he forgot was the door, and so it chanced that Marguerite entered the room unseen by either of the actors, who were quite oblivious of their audience.

Stifling a laugh, the Queen of Navarre turned her back and began tapping her foot against the floor.

Marie gave a little cry—more merry than shamed, if truth be confessed—but de Mouhy was more bashful. Releasing the girl's waist he darted for the door, scarcely daring to meet the Princess's laughing glance, his face scarlet beneath its tan.

"Oh, Marie, Marie," cried Marguerite, shaking her finger at her unrepentant maid, as the door closed rather more hastily than ceremony might have thought fitting, "I don't think Calvin himself would be safe with you."

Marie dropped the prettiest of curtseys.

"Indeed he would, Madame," she laughed. "He preaches too much. I want a husband who won't talk."

"A husband! Is it so serious, child? Well, I wish you joy. I'm so happy I could wish the whole world in love to-night. Even my mother couldn't vex me when she kept me in her apartments, as if I were a child. Ah, where is my ribbon, Marie?"

Marie looked surprised. "Your ribbon?" she said.

"Yes, I told you to get it back." There was a shade of impatience in Marguerite's voice.

"Alas, Madame, I have not got it," murmured Marie, with downcast eyes.

Marguerite caught back her breath with a little gasp of vexation.

"What! he would not part with it? You told him 'To-night' was 'Never'?"

"I told him nothing, Madame,—the Duke had disappeared."

The glad light of happiness faded from Marguerite's eyes, a look of fear and anxiety took its place.

"Disappeared!" she faltered. Then clasped her hands in sudden resolution. "You must find him, Marie," she cried. "Seek him at once. Do you understand? *At once!*"

"I saw Monsieur de Besme."

"Well?"

"He said that the Duke had given orders that he was on no account to be sought for before morning. His servants dare not disobey him."

Marguerite sank into a chair, covering her face with her hands.

"Oh, Marie, he will come here, just when I am so happy."

Marie knelt by her mistress's side, her eyes full of sympathy.

"And if the King of Navarre should come——" she whispered.

Marguerite smiled. "He won't," she said softly. "He has given me his word. Yet he may hear, and I want his trust, his faith. If he is told that the Guise was here I should never be able to convince him that I . . . that I . . . love him."

Marie looked up wonderingly into the pale, sad face, with its dark eyes welling with tears.

"You love your husband, Madame?" she asked very gently.

Marguerite pressed her hand.

"Yes, child," she answered, "I—I love him."

Answering tears gathered in little Marie's eyes. "Oh, if I had but known!" she cried. "I thought . . . But the Guise must not come. I'll go at once. I'll meet him at the door, and turn him back."

Even as she spoke a gentle rapping was heard without.

The two girls looked at each other apprehensively.

"It is he," whispered Marguerite faintly, whilst her hand clasped that of Marie. "It is he."

Again the rapping was repeated, a little louder this time.

"Go to the door," whispered the young Queen—and her eyes were like stars, "and say I'm not here, Marie." A smile broke over her face for an instant. "Say," she added, "say I'm with my husband."

Marie crossed to the door quickly, and opened it. "Who are you?" she whispered; "and what do you want?"

"It is I—the Guise," replied an impatient voice. "The Queen of Navarre expects me."

"Monsieur, it is impossible. The . . . the Queen of Navarre is not here."

"Not here! Parbleu! I tell you she is here,—she is expecting me. Where else should she be?"

"Monsieur, she is—she is——"

The Duke swore hotly beneath his breath, and pushed open the door. "Stand aside, girl," he cried angrily. "I am the Guise."

And, though Marie vainly strove to bar the way, he pushed her roughly aside, and, entering, closed the door behind.

Marguerite had risen, and stood cowering back in one of the farthest corners of the room.

Guise halted, staring at her, evidently surprised at such a reception.

He was dressed in a suit of his favourite silver and grey, his face flushed and eager, the saturnine expression on it more marked than ever, and, though his lips were twisted into a forced smile, the scar on his cheek was livid.

"Margot," he cried, and looked wonderingly at her frightened face.

Marie had slipped past him and was hastening to her mistress's side.

Guise frowned.

"You may go, girl!" he said haughtily.

Marie hesitated, but Marguerite stretched out her hands imploringly.

"No, no," she cried; "don't leave me, for Heaven's sake—don't leave me, Marie."

"Margot," exclaimed Guise again, and his eyes were dangerous. "What does this mean?"

Marguerite drew herself up proudly. After all, she was a Valois, and would not cringe even to a Guise.

"Monsieur," she said, with an air of great dignity, "as you are a gentleman, I ask you to go at once."

"Is this your ribbon, Madame?" he asked, and the livid scar was growing purple with suppressed passion.

"Yes," faltered Marguerite; "but—but——"

"Did you not send it to me?" he demanded remorselessly.

"I did, but I was wrong."

The dark head drooped for a moment as the girl stood there, trembling, fearful, a slender, graceful figure in her rich gown, the jewels gleaming fitfully on her breast and around her white throat.

Marie, crouching in the background, watched, fascinated—not so much by her mistress as by the figure opposite, the figure in grey and silver, tall, commanding, handsome, yet with the devil's beauty,—and the devil's passion, stamped on the dark face.

Marguerite raised her head, and shuddered as she too encountered the gaze of those burning eyes.

"I was wrong," she said, speaking coldly, and with a touch of that magnificent pride which was her birthright. "Monsieur de Guise, I would have you know I love my husband. It is true he angered me, and, in a fit of jealousy, I turned to you to punish him. I was mad. I confess it. But the moment you were gone I recovered myself. I sent to get my token back, but it

was too late. I beg you, as you are a gentleman, to leave this room at once."

Henry of Guise bowed. But his eyes did not leave her face. Their gaze seemed to sear her very soul.

"And you think," he said slowly, "that the *Guise* is to be made a plaything to rouse the envy of a Béarnais? Madame, you sent for me, and you shall hear me. Listen! Cannot you see that I love you? I love you, Margot. Read the truth in my eyes—in my voice, aye!—in my heart, if you will."

Again Marguerite shuddered.

"The Guise's heart!" she cried, and dared not raise her eyes to his.

Guise laughed. The low, mocking laugh which told so much more than words.

"Margot," he said, and his words rang deep into her heart, each one clear, incisive, as the cut of a whip, "Margot, I love you. I have sworn that you shall be mine."

This time she raised her eyes, flashing him a glance of such contempt as should have annihilated him.

But this was the Guise, and he only bowed as though her wordless hate were a compliment. Yet his eyes grew more sinister. "Mine," said he. "My wife—Margot."

She laughed scornfully.

"You forget, Monsieur," she said, "I am the Queen of Navarre."

The shrug of his shoulder was politely insulting, his smile goaded her.

"For that," said he, "we shall see. You are the Queen of Navarre to-day, and you say you love your husband. Will you love him when he's dead?"

He stepped a little nearer, thrusting his dark face closer to her own.

Marguerite drew back.

"Henry, Henry!" she cried aloud, in a sudden access of fear. But Guise pressed closer.

"Why did Charles give the fairest flower in his realm—his Marguerite—to a heretic?" he whispered significantly. "He only loves a Huguenot when he is dead."

Marguerite's eyes were wide with terror, as though suddenly there yawned in her path a fresh and unseen pitfall.

"Do you mean," she asked faintly, "my marriage—my marriage——"

"I repeat it was not meant that you should love Navarre, nor he love you. That marriage was a farce—a——"

"A trap?" whispered Marguerite, and her face was deathly.

"Nay," laughed Guise, as he caught her hands. "What you will, sweet, so it was not love. That is the language which——"

Marguerite strove vainly to wrench her hands free.

The Guise's face was near, his eyes triumphant.

"Henry!" she cried, "Henry!"

A loud tapping at the window brought the interruption Marguerite had so vainly hoped for, yet she

screamed aloud as she saw a masked face pressed close against the window.

The Guise swore mightily beneath his breath as he fell back, his hand grasping his sword.

Next instant the window had been pushed open, and a man, unrecognizable in a mask and closely fitting black velvet suit, leapt into the room.

"Ventre de Pape," growled Guise, and his sword flashed.

The stranger flung out his arms.

"Put up your sword, Monsieur le Duc," he panted. "I am a friend, see—I am unarmed."

Still the Guise advanced. He was in no pleasant mood just then, and required an explanation.

"What do you here?" he asked haughtily.

"To warn you," panted the man. He had seemingly come in hot haste.

"Of what, Monsieur?"

"Of the King. He knows of your coming. He plans to surprise you here to-night. Any moment may bring him."

Marguerite wrung her hands. "My brother," she wailed. "Then my husband will know. Alas! What shall I do?"

Guise laughed shortly.

"Let him come," he snarled. "I do not fear to meet him."

"The Guise's courage is well known," murmured the stranger; "but has Monsieur no consideration for his lady?"

Guise hesitated, divided between the desire to run the fellow through for his impertinence, and the knowledge that he spoke wisely.

The latter thought prevailed. After all, the masked gentleman evidently meant to act as his friend.

"You are right," he said coldly. "I will go."

And he turned to the door.

"Not that way!" exclaimed he of the black velvet.

"The door is watched."

For once Guise was startled out of his icy serenity.

"Watched?" he muttered.

"Open it, and you will hear the guard."

Guise opened the door, and for a minute all held their breaths to listen.

A clamour of voices reached them from the other end of the long corridor coming from the Salle des Caryatides, the gallery above the King's Chamber. The clamour died into silence, then a laugh rang out, much nearer, and a voice cried aloud, "Gentlemen, the King."

It was enough. Guise closed the door. His face was very white.

"Bolt it, Marie," cried the Queen of Navarre feverishly. "Ah! what shall we do? What shall we do?"

"We can do nothing," muttered Guise, and his eyes narrowed viciously.

"If Your Highness will trust me——" said the stranger, bowing low.

"Take off your mask," interrupted Guise. "Let me see your face."

"Monsieur, I cannot."

"They are coming," cried Marie, who had been listening at the door.

The news threw Marguerite into a fresh agony.

"Oh, go, Monsieur," she pleaded. "For Heaven's sake, go,—go."

Guisse turned on his heel. "Come on, fellow," he muttered; "show me the way."

There was not a moment to be lost. Even Marguerite could hear the sound of approaching feet and the usher's voice proclaiming at intervals—

"Gentlemen, the King."

The stranger had run back to the window. Guisse followed him, and leant over his shoulder staring out.

"Mort des diables!" he growled, "it's as black as the pit, and as bottomless."

"The ladder is strong," replied the other.

But Guisse had already drawn back. "I'll not go!" he cried fiercely. "This is some trick. I'll not risk my life on a frail rope."

The man in the mask laughed mockingly beneath his breath.

"I walked that cornice," quoth he grimly, "to bring it to you."

"I am no mountebank," was the retort, "to climb a house-side."

Hardly had the words left his lips than loud blows were heard on the door without, whilst a commanding voice cried, "Open, open."

Marguerite, who was cowering in a chair, her courage deserting her in this extremity, raised a white face.

"Speak to them, Marie," she whispered.

"Who's there?" cried the trembling girl, but her voice shook as she spoke the words.

"The King," cried back those without. "Open, open."

Marguerite was looking at Guise.

"Charles!" she moaned.

Guise tried to answer. His lips were dry. Then he leant once more from the window and drew back, shuddering.

"What," quoth the stranger still more grimly, "is the Guise *afraid*?"

The last word stung the Duke into madness. "No, damn you," he muttered furiously, and flung one leg over the window sill. Ere he disappeared, however, into the night, he looked back, drawing a ring from his finger. "For the service you have done me," said he, "I give you this ring. I will redeem it with whatever you demand. For the word you said then, if ever we meet again, I'll kill you with this hand."

The stranger took the ring, bowing.

"I thank you, Monsieur," he cried, and leant forward, eagerly watching the Duke, who swayed for an instant, clinging to the window-ledge, whilst his legs sought and found the rope ladder.

As Guise was rapidly descending into safety the blows at the door were becoming violent.

The King of France was not accustomed to being kept waiting.

Marguerite had risen from her seat, and had hastened to the stranger's side, her black eyes filled with joy as she saw the Guise disappear.

"Quick, quick," she cried, "follow him, Monsieur, whoever you are,—and my gratitude go with you."

But the mask had stepped back from the window, swearing lustily, "Morbleu! Madame, the ladder—I have dropped it."

The joy faded from the beautiful face. "And they will find you!" cried the young Queen in despair. "Oh! I shall be ruined after all. No, no, they mustn't. Quick! this way, hide, hide!"

In her impetuosity she was dragging him forward into the inner room. In spite of his peril, the stranger could not forbear laughing.

"But, Madame," he protested.

But Marguerite had wrenched open the door of a secret cabinet and pushed him in. "There," she cried, and turned the key.

The blows without threatened to break down the door. Charles's voice could be heard above the din, cursing audibly.

Marguerite was tearing off her dress in hot haste, and flinging a dressing-gown of pale blue silk about her shoulders.

"Open the door, Marie," she cried, and proceeded to loosen the coils of her magnificent black hair.

Then, with an assumption of the greatest innocence and wonder, she followed Marie into the room beyond.

It was crowded with the King and his suite. Charles was evidently fuming with passion.

"By the splendour of Heaven!" he cried angrily, at sight of his sister, "you keep me waiting, Margot!"

The Queen curtsied, blinking sleepy eyes, as though she had been roused from slumber. "The hour is late, Sire," she replied, with a well-affected little yawn. "I had to arrange my attire," and she shook back her heavy tresses, looking in childish perplexity from the King to Marshal de Tavannes, de Retz, and the other gentlemen who thronged behind him. It was a relief not to see her husband amongst them. He trusted her then!

"Are you alone, Margot?" asked the King, advancing, with a frown puckering his forehead, whilst he glanced keenly round the room.

"I have my maid, Sire," murmured Marguerite, still sleepily, yet her heart beat fast.

But Charles was in no mood for bandying words. He had come to slay the Guise, and his purpose was hot within him.

"Madame," he said sternly, "the Duc de Guise is here. Do you deny it?"

Marguerite flushed crimson, but she answered firmly—

"Yes, Sire."

"You swear it?"

"Yes, by Ste. Genéviève."

Charles's fury burst forth uncontrollably.

"You lie, jade," he screamed, "you lie. A man was seen to enter here. I know it was the Guise. Search

high and low. By the splendour of Heaven! he shall not escape me."

Reluctantly the gentlemen of the suite, led by Tavannes, began to search the apartments.

Marguerite stood by, pale but smiling. She knew how to act, this Princess of France; but for all her outward calm her brain seemed on fire, her heart suffocated her with its tumultuous throbbings. Would they remember the cabinet? Would they find the stranger? What would be the end of it? Anything, everything, sooner than she should lose her husband's love—her husband's trust.

Yet, whilst her heart cried, her lips mocked.

"Search, Sire, search," she cried to Charles, who stood moodily by her side, whilst the rest carried on their search. "You'll not find him here."

"The other room, Tavannes," snarled Charles. "Put your sword through every cranny. If it draw blood, so much the better."

"It is useless, Sire," replied Marguerite coolly. "The Guise is not here."

"And I say that he is. By the splendour of Heaven! I'll pull the palace down, but I'll find him."

Marguerite stamped her foot.

"This is unpardonable, Sire. I'll not endure it."

Tavannes approached the King. "The room is empty, Sire," he said.

Charles hesitated, his eyes on his sister's face. Then he chuckled. "Aha!" he cried, "the cabinet. You thought I had forgotten that, Madame Margot."

Marguerite gave a faint cry.

"Sire !"

But already Charles had rushed into the inner room, and was fumbling with the lock of the cabinet.

"The key," he cried, "the key. Madame, it is useless to hesitate. Obey, or it will be the worse for you."

So terrible was his frown that Marguerite was obliged to draw the key from her pocket and hand it to him. She was trembling violently. Charles turned the key in the lock, and, flinging open the door of the cabinet, sprang in.

The light from the room behind disclosed the figure of a man, closely masked and dressed in a suit of black velvet.

He had not at all the appearance of the Guise, and seemed not in the least disturbed by the sudden discovery.

He rose, bowing.

Charles was speechless with rage.

"Death of the devils," he screamed at length. "Who are you ? and what are you doing here ?" and he half drew his sword from its sheath.

The stranger untied his mask, and disclosed a swart, merry face, with a hook nose and curling chin which seemed bent on meeting over their owner's laughing mouth, and a pair of keen grey eyes.

"Morbleu, Sire," quoth Henry of Navarre gaily. "Where should a man be but in his wife's rooms ?"

And he glanced over the King's shoulder to where

Marguerite stood. The Queen had sunk half-swooning against Marie Belleforêt.

Charles was still gaping in amazement, doubtful whether to be angry or to laugh at the trick played on him.

But Henry's merry mood was infectious, and the King burst into a roar of laughter.

"Pardi!" he swore. "The husband is the last person one would expect to find hiding in his wife's cabinet! But come, Harry, since the Guise is not here, let's go to supper. I'm hungry." And he linked his arm in Navarre's.

The latter did not look again in his wife's direction as he left the apartments. And Marguerite cried herself to sleep.

It seemed that after all she had lost her husband's love.

CHAPTER XXII

THE ADMIRAL'S ASSASSIN

ARTHUR DE MOUHY was hastening back to his inn, the "Belle Etoile," in the Rue Etienne. Since early dawn he had been playing tennis with his master and the Prince de Condé. Now he was returning to dress himself more becomingly for waiting on his mistress. It was really too absurd how a pair of blue eyes had upset the ideas of this stolid young soldier. At one time there had been but three words written on his heart, "Navarre—the Religion," now, Mademoiselle Belleforêt had come tripping into the sanctuary, and had seemingly taken entire possession, filling his honest mind with most frivolous visions of blue eyes and golden hair.

Nevertheless he slackened his steps, as, outside the gates of the Louvre, he overtook a tall but shrunken figure, dressed in dark coloured velvet. It was Admiral Coligny, the great Huguenot leader, an old man now, whose pinched shoulders and thin face betokened the feeble health, which was instantly belied by the fire that burnt in his eye. A noble face that, with its broad, square forehead, firm mouth, and powerfully moulded chin. To *look* at him one would know instinctively

that this was a leader of men. He smiled kindly at the young man, greeting him warmly.

De Mouhy, forgetful, for the moment, of blue eyes, responded eagerly. In all France there was no one the Huguenots held so near their hearts as the Admiral.

A crowd, close by, brought them to a momentary standstill. Catherine de Medici and her ladies were starting on an expedition to visit the shrine of Ste. Genéviève.

The mob gaped at the sight of the Queen-Mother,* who, with her passion for inventing new modes, was not even content to ride like every one else, but sat perched on a new, strange saddle, which bore her sideways, to the intense interest of the Parisians.

It was not till the train had disappeared out of sight that the crowd dispersed. De Mouhy, who had caught sight of a small piquante face under a cap of blue satin, was smiling, but Coligny's brows were drawn down in a frown. He did not love the Medici, any more than she him.

"Had I known that the Queen-Mother would be absent," said he, "I would have presented my petition later." And he touched the portfolio he carried under his arm. "As it was, Charles was in a strange mood. It is well, de Mouhy, that he loves me, else I know not what his mother's influence might lead him to do. She is our bitterest enemy."

"Excepting the Guise."

* It was Catherine de Medici who first introduced the side-saddle.

"Yes, the Guise is dangerous, too. But he has not the cunning of Catherine, nor her power with the King. If we had to fight the Guise alone, I should not be afraid."

"The King of Navarre has had some proof of her treachery already."

"It is God alone, Monsieur, Who protects him, and, indeed, all of us. At times . . ." He paused, lost in thought, his grey beard sunk on his breast. He had not come that morning from the Council Chamber in the brightest of spirits. The King's strange manner, and an ominous sense of foreboding, for the moment depressed that dauntless spirit.

They were passing down the Rue Saint Germain l'Auxerrois on the way to the Rue Béthisy, where the Admiral lodged. Since Marie Belleforêt was absent from the Louvre, de Mouhy was in no hurry to return to his inn.

"At times," continued the Admiral, raising his head and looking gravely into his companion's face, "I fear we have done wrong to trust to the word of one who is little better than a madman."

Even as he spoke the words the crack of an arquebuss sounded close by. Coligny staggered, and would have fallen had not de Mouhy, with a cry of horror, caught him. Instantly, however, the Admiral recovered himself. The would-be assassin had missed striking any vital part, though the ball had entered his left arm carrying off the forefinger of his right hand on its way. "Let the King be told of this," said the old hero coolly,

as he pointed to a window above them, from which a man's head and shoulders were disappearing.

De Mouhy uttered an exclamation of rage, and, seeing that the Admiral—although wounded—was able to proceed homewards without assistance, he thrust open the door of the house and dashed up the passage, hoping to secure the man who had perpetrated so dastardly a crime. He was only in time, however, to see the fleeing figure of the murderer, who had hurried downstairs immediately after firing his shot, and, flinging away his weapon, had made good his escape through a back door and up a side street.

De Mouhy saw him reach the spot where a horse was being held in readiness, spring on its back, and gallop away. Yet, in that one glimpse he had of the face which for a moment looked back to see if any were in pursuit, the young man recognized François Maurevel, the assassin who some time since had killed his own father. With an oath he sprang forward, but already the horseman was out of sight.

De Mouhy leant back against the wall of a house, wiping the perspiration from his brow.

Maurevel! Maurevel! The man he had so long and so vainly searched for, the man he had sworn to slay. Maurevel, the murderer of his father, the would-be assassin of the Admiral! As he thought of that last crime his hot blood suddenly cooled.

Maurevel had been ready to fire the shot which should have robbed the Huguenots of a leader and the King of France of a trusted counsellor,

—but there was a more powerful arm behind Maurevel's.

He was remembering the man who had held the horse on which the assassin had escaped. He had immediately vanished, but de Mouhy had recognized the livery of the Guise.

It was the Guise's plot.

Resolution followed instantly on realization. He would return to the Louvre, even before visiting the Admiral, and disclose all to the King. In great haste he proceeded up the street. It was a squalid back alley, empty and deserted. Yet, as he hurried on, he perceived a knot of gentlemen suddenly step from one of the houses, barring the way.

It was not difficult to recognize Antoine de Varais and others of the Guise's suite.

De Mouhy paused. The group in front was evidently antagonistic, but de Varais was laughing.

The young Huguenot's cheeks flamed, and he made a step forward, his sword drawn. The gentlemen in front also drew theirs. De Varais was becoming boisterous.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo," he called, making pretence of flapping his wings. "Cock-a-doodle-doo—my knight of the white feather. Come and be spitted for roasting, for that's what you'll be doing ere long. Roasting in the pit, my pretty heretic. Pardi! and the right place for you, instead of flaunting before silly maids in borrowed plumes. Come on and see if you like the kisses of the cold steel. You will find *foi de gentil-*

homme * more to be relied on than *foi de Mademoiselle*. Come on and try it, Monsieur."

But de Mouhy had come to a dead halt. Dearly though his fingers itched to have his sword at the throat of this blatant bully, there were other things to be remembered. He must tell Charles the story of the assassin's attempt on Coligny's life, and also of the man in the livery of the Guise who had held the horse in the Rue des Trois Frères.

So he did not advance at Monsieur de Varais' invitation, for, however brave a man is or skilful a swordsman, he cannot hope to fight successfully against six antagonists.

Therefore he halted, looking for a way of escape. De Varais' gibes became yet more insulting. He did not heed them. Another time would do for the settling of accounts. Now he was less Arthur de Mouhy than the soldier of Navarre. With a sudden and unexpected movement he turned and was running like a hare down the street.

He could hear the gibes turning to angry curses, and the clatter of booted heels behind, and knew that his purpose was understood. But in Gascony they learn to run as well as climb, and no deer with cruel hounds upon her track could have fled more swiftly.

But, though those behind were no match for him in speed, they were in cunning. Moreover, they knew Paris, knew also that their quarry dared not turn into

* A name given to the long rapiers used at that period.

the more crowded streets, for fear that the cry of "A Guise, A Guise" might be raised by his pursuers.

So they pressed on the track, just keeping their man in sight, and that was all.

A breathless chase was that, with no moment in which to pause and consider what was best to be done.

De Mouhy drew in his breath for a fresh spurt. If only he could give them the slip and double on his track. Houses seemed to reel around him—the excitement less than exhaustion made him giddy. Those behind him came silently now—yet they came.

A sudden shout. De Varais' voice,—and de Mouhy stopped short. In their better knowledge of the streets half his pursuers had doubled, and now from in front and behind men were running towards him with blades drawn and the lust of slaying in their eyes.

He gripped his sword, and wondered swiftly what Marie Belleforêt would think when she heard of his death.

A tear—a sigh—and poof! Only a Huguenot soldier gone! The lover perchance of a day. But with plenty remaining for blue eyes to smile on.

So he may have thought in his despair—or perhaps more kindly—not wronging the truth in innocent eyes. Be that as it may, there was but a moment to think in, the next a door had been flung open, and a woman's voice cried to him.

The hare does not hesitate to shelter when the hounds press her close, without another thought de Mouhy had

leapt in through the door, and heard it close heavily in the faces of his adversaries.

For a moment exhaustion held him panting there with no breath to question, though he peered through the darkness with growing curiosity at sight of that slim black-veiled figure.

Soft fingers caught his, dragging him on down a dark passage.

"Quick, Monsieur," whispered a woman's voice in his ear. "For the love of Heaven do not delay; they will break down the door ere long."

CHAPTER XXIII

RUGGIERI'S DAUGHTER

DE MOUHY looked around him in astonishment. He was standing in a tiny room, lighted by a single lamp, for, though it was not yet noonday, the chamber had no windows.

"Where am I?" he asked, glancing around at the rich hangings and costly furniture of the apartment, which was little larger than a closet, yet fitted with every luxury. A subtle perfume pervaded the atmosphere; de Mouhy, sniffing, seemed to find it familiar.

The girl, who had saved him thus strangely, had thrown back her veil, disclosing a dark, glowing beauty, with brown eyes sparkling in excitement.

De Mouhy recognized her.

It was Bianca Ruggieri. The daughter of the Florentine astrologer.

"Mademoiselle," he exclaimed with emotion, kneeling to kiss her hand, "you have saved my life."

"Monsieur," she replied, smiling, "you once saved mine. Do you not remember?"

"It was more the King of Navarre's doing than mine, Mademoiselle," he said modestly.

"My father has not forgotten to thank the King,"

she made answer. "He has left me to remember that I owe a debt to Monsieur de Mouhy."

He repeated his own name in some surprise at her knowledge, but Bianca raised her finger.

"Monsieur," she said, with that slightly foreign accent that made her speech so charming, "you must recall that you are not yet saved. Your enemies will certainly break down the door, for my ears tell me that they are not content to allow you to escape, and, if we do not make haste, they will find us here, and perhaps kill us both."

De Mouhy started. He had almost forgotten both his peril and his mission in the surprise of such an unexpected salvation.

"What shall I do?" he muttered, glancing around. "Sooner than bring danger on you, Mademoiselle, I will go and make a fight for it. I do not think I shall be the only one to die."

"You are not going to die at all," she replied, laughing very softly, as she drew back a curtain of Oriental satin, disclosing the carved panels of the wall.

"See," she continued, "follow me, Monsieur, and have no fear."

And she touched one of the panels, which opened inwards, leaving a narrow aperture, through which she slipped.

"There are stairs," she whispered, "and I dare not carry a light. You must be careful, Monsieur, or you will die of a broken neck after all."

De Mouhy laughed.

"It is a good thing I have not lived very long at Court," said he, "or I should certainly not have squeezed through that opening, Mademoiselle," and he rubbed his shoulder ruefully.

"Take my hand," replied Bianca, "and I will guide you. But, there! you are a Gascon, and therefore not afraid of steep stairs."

"I don't think my neck will be broken this time," smiled de Mouhy; but all the same he allowed Bianca's slim fingers to rest within his.

Far above them they could hear the storming and shouting of the Guisards. Apparently they had collected half Paris about the astrologer's door! Presently a crash was heard.

Bianca stopped.

"They have broken down the door," she said. "I must go back, or they may suspect the truth and burn down the house. You cannot lose your way, Monsieur. Go straight on now along the passage; soon you will find other stairs. Mount them, and, when you reach the top, push hard. There is a trap door. It leads into the cellar of a house farther down the street. The house is empty. You will find no difficulty in escaping by the back door, which opens on to the Rue d'Averon close to the Louvre. You will reach the palace before your enemies have done searching our house."

De Mouhy pressed the hand he held in his. "Mademoiselle," he said earnestly, "I cannot permit it. If you return alone those devils may kill you."

Bianca laughed. "It is because they will find me

alone that I shall be safe, Monsieur," she replied. "If you accompanied me, not even my name would save me. As it is, the followers of the Duc de Guise will not dare to molest the daughter of Cosmo Ruggieri."

So true were her words, and spoken with so much decision and spirit, that de Mouhy was silenced.

"Then, Mademoiselle," he said at last, "it only remains for me to thank you for my life, and that is a difficult task. I cannot express my gratitude."

"Monsieur," replied the Florentine, and her voice trembled, "once you and your master gave me more than life; what I have done for you is as nothing in return for such service. Monsieur, I have a lover. He also is grateful. It may be that the day will come when he too can prove it. I pray you wear this ring; it is one of little value, but, should Pierre Grissac see it, he will know to whom to pay the debt he owes."

In the darkness she lifted his left hand, slipping a ring upon his little finger.

Before he could thank her she had gone.

"Certainly," quoth de Mouhy to himself, as he hurried along the passage, "that adventure of ours was worth something. These people have memories, it seems, although Ruggieri may lack a conscience."

The passage was a long one, the darkness impenetrable. It must be confessed that de Mouhy was not very sorry when he reached the stairs. He would be glad enough to breathe the fresh air—for this place had the gloom of a charnel-house, and the atmosphere of one.

At length he found the trap door. It was heavy. But, when a man is in a hurry, he does not set much count on weights. With the third heave of his broad shoulders the trap fell back, and de Mouhy crept out into a dismal cellar.

Bah! Another charnel-house! The clamminess of the air made him shiver. Nevertheless, there was sufficient light to enable him to look around. There was not much to see excepting grey walls and a damp floor reeking with slime and uncleanness, in which wallowed many a fat toad and other noxious reptiles. But beyond stood a door. De Mouhy lost no time in darting through it and up the stairs. He was laughing as he went. He wished he could see de Varais' face just then. That cock had crowed too soon.

The house was deserted, as Bianca had told him. Speedily he found himself in the Rue d'Averon. There was no fear now of pursuit, yet he did not slacken his pace. He must reach the King before de Varais could do so.

Charles was playing tennis with the Duc de Guise and Teligny. He had quite recovered from the disturbing episodes of the night before.

At sight of de Mouhy's dishevelled appearance he burst into a loud laugh, pausing in his game.

"Mort de ma vie, de Mouhy," he cried, "you certainly do not court your mistress to-day."

And he winked at Teligny.

De Mouhy, however, flung himself on one knee before him.

"Your Majesty!" he cried passionately, "a foul outrage has been committed. In the name of my master, I demand to know by whose orders?"

Charles's face clouded ominously. "By the splendour of Heaven," he swore, "what mean you, sirrah? I would have you know your master can very well speak for himself. Yet tell me what hath chanced, and beware how you speak? Remember, I am the King."

"Sire," replied de Mouhy sorrowfully, "well do I know that it was not by the command of the King of France that Admiral Coligny was fired on as he passed down the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois."

Charles stared.

"The Admiral fired on," he cried, bursting into a storm of curses. "Admiral Coligny fired on!"

"Aye, Sire," replied de Mouhy boldly, "and had it not been for God's providence he had been a dead man ere now." And briefly he related the scene of the morning.

Charles's face became distorted with passion. "By whose orders," he thundered, "was this outrage committed? I will have my subjects remember that *I* am King of France."

"The order was given by the Duc de Guise, Sire," replied de Mouhy; "the assassin was François Mau-revel, my father's murderer."

Charles wheeled round in a fury.

"Seize him!" he cried. "Seize him!" And he looked across to where the Guise had stood. The place was empty.

Flinging down his racquet, the King abruptly left the tennis-court and entered the palace, his attendants following, whispering together in awed tones. The disgrace of the Guise was a matter for astonishment and wonder indeed!

Meantime de Mouhy sought the King of Navarre. He found him amusing himself with a book of the chase.

In a few words the story was told. Henry flung down the book and began to pace the room in violent agitation.

"It is the beginning of the end, de Mouhy," he said. "The Guise may be in disgrace to-day, but to-morrow he will be ruling Paris. Catherine is behind all, and it is she who pulls the strings which form a noose for us. *Ventre Ste. Gris!* It is no use. The King is mad, and Catherine is a she-devil."

"The King has ordered the arrest of Monsieur de Guise," said de Mouhy. "Some say that he has already fled from Paris. As for the assassin, Charles swears that he shall be tortured till he confesses all."

"What! Is he caught?"

"Nay, Sire; but he will be."

"Not he, de Mouhy. You may chase the hare—not the weasel. He has too many holes in which to hide his head. No, Maurevel will not be caught, and Henry of Guise will not be arrested. It is Henry of Navarre who will suffer."

And he groaned.

"My poor people," he muttered. "Will he spare any?"

The door of the apartment was thrown open, and King Charles entered. His face was flushed and tear-stained, he appeared to be sincerely affected.

"Harry," he cried, "I vow to you that this outrage shall be avenged. The Guise has gone too far this time, he shall learn his lesson. Believe me, these wounds of my dear father the Admiral are mine—the grief and outrage are mine. But I will take such vengeance as shall never be forgotten."

And he embraced Henry tenderly.

The King of Navarre murmured his thanks, but his eyes were cold. These protestations did not cost much.

In the afternoon King Charles, accompanied by his mother, and brother of Anjou, visited the Admiral, where the King again expressed his horror of the crime.

Immediately on hearing the news of the attempted assassination Queen Catherine had sent Ambrose Paré, her famous Huguenot physician, to attend on the sick man, and the ball had been successfully extricated from Coligny's arm.

The Admiral received his royal guests with composure, assuring the King that he was convinced of his ignorance of the affair.

Catherine, with her suave smile, was all sympathy, but she took the first opportunity of carrying the King off, declaring that the invalid must not be disturbed.

When the King of Navarre was told of the visit he smiled.

“Has the Duc de Guise been arrested?” he asked significantly.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE KINDLING OF THE FLAME

IT was the evening of the twenty-fourth of August. The weather was sultry and oppressive. The atmosphere of the Louvre was even more so. All the day King Charles had been swayed by countless emotions. The news of the attempt on Coligny's life had been followed by a rumour that the Huguenots had sworn to kill Henry of Guise.

The thought that their favourite hero was in danger of assassination roused the populace to fury; in spite of the King's commands the people took up arms, and were quelled only with the greatest difficulty. Driven back to their lairs, the thunder of hatred still growled sullenly forth from the Halles and Sorbonne. The crust of the volcano was ready to break at a moment's notice.

Meantime the King, maddened to a frenzy by his terrors, was soothed at length by the persuasions of Catherine and the Marshal de Retz. The King of Navarre had been twice refused audience, the Queen-Mother avowing that Charles needed rest.

And now evening had come, yet brought with it no refreshing breezes.

Charles, lying on a couch in his private room, passed a burning hand over his forehead. "Sing, Etienne, sing," he commanded, "drive these devils away," and he shuddered, staring up into space.

Catherine stole softly to her son's side as Etienne Leroy, one of Charles's Huguenot favourites, began to sing Marot's Psalm, "As pants the hart for cooling streams."

The young King closed his eyes with a sigh. The music soothed him as nothing else had done all day.

"Thank you, my Etienne, thank you," he murmured when the singer ceased.

Leroy bowed, and, at a sign from Catherine, retired.

Charles lay still, with fevered eyes, wide open, fixed on the ceiling above him.

"As pants the hart for cooling streams," he muttered.

"No hart ever burned for water as I burn within."

Catherine placed her cool hand on his forehead.

"You are not well, my son," she murmured. "I will send for Ambrose Paré."

Charles tossed his arms over his head restlessly.

"Nay, mother," he answered, "it's my soul that's on fire! Ah, how I've tried to wear it out, to tire it until it dropped off to sleep. Mother, I may break and bruise this poor body, but until it is dust, my soul will burn within me day and night."

"Your Majesty exhausts himself too much," said Tavannes, who stood near the young monarch's couch. "These midnight chases through the silent forests

until the horses drop and the dogs rebel, they fret you to a fever."

"Tavannes, you don't know," groaned Charles. "Can I lie through the night and hear the voices muttering in my ear? Mother, think you that Cosmo Ruggieri speaks the truth?"

Catherine smoothed the damp hair back from the clammy forehead. "Our path is planned before," she replied softly. "We can but tread it."

"Two years, two years," muttered Charles. "And—and I *dare* not die." His eyes roved madly.

"Son," murmured the Queen-Mother, "you shall have sleep. There is one way to still these midnight mutterings, to cheer your troubled mind."

Charles sprang up. "A way!—to sleep?" he cried joyfully. "Oh, I would walk through hell, and never flinch, were I sure of rest at last. Who can bring me rest?"

Like some creeping brood of harpies they gathered closer around the couch—those men who were set on their deadly deed,—but the woman whose brain inspired theirs, the she-fiend who plotted and planned so ceaselessly to gain her end, only smiled into the distraught blue eyes with a look of motherly sympathy. "Yourself, my son, you can find it yourself," she whispered.

"Myself?" echoed Charles, with a sob. "I've tortured myself until I am one vast pain."

Catherine bent forward, her hand on his, her eyes fascinating—dominating him.

"Be God's arm on earth," she hissed. "Stamp out these heretics, purge France clean."

Charles closed his eyes wearily. "Drench France with blood," he muttered, "and have their shadows round me in the night. Eyes to look into mine—lips to mouth at me, crying 'Betrayed'—'Betrayed!' Mort de ma vie! Have I not pictured it all? The chatterings, the screams, the pointing fingers with blood on them—always blood."

The foam frothed about his lips.

It was Anjou who brought him to his senses. "It is they or you, brother," he said shortly. "And, since the Guise wounded Coligny, they swear they'll have the Guise's blood or yours."

"And so they shall," screamed Charles, breaking from fear into rage. "And so they shall! Am I not King of Catholic and Huguenot alike? I've banished Guise the Court; if he returns the Huguenots shall have his blood—the bungler. Why did he not kill the Admiral outright? Why did he wound him, and leave him to plead for justice?"

"If you would but give the word," struck in Tavannes' sinister voice; "all is prepared, not one of them would trouble you again."

"Not one of them," mused Charles, and into his eyes crept the old crafty look of cunning. "I'll not have Harry touched, though. I like the Béarnais and he likes me."

As he spoke the shrill voice of little Aurèle de Brié announced the King of Navarre.

Charles turned eagerly, stretching out a welcoming hand to his cousin.

"Ah, Harry," he cried, "we were just talking of you."

Henry laughed gaily.

"I felt my ears burn," he said, bending to kiss the outstretched hand. "But I thought it was because I was a heretic."

Charles frowned. "Nay, a grim jest," he said; "but I'll not burn you, Harry. Yet, why don't you leave your chill-blooded comrades and join the Church of your fathers?"

"Ventre Ste. Gris," replied Henry lightly, yet with a quick glance round the room. "Because, Sire, I like my mother's better."

"She was a brave woman."

"There was no better in the world, Sire."

And the King of Navarre bent his head, for his love to his mother had been very great.

Catherine, who had watched the affectionate greeting between the cousins with ill-concealed annoyance, had withdrawn into a further corner of the room, beckoning Marshal Tavannes to her side.

"I must get him hence," she whispered. "The King is restless to-night, and may consent. Henry will spoil all."

Tavannes knit his heavy brows in perplexity. "A word from the Princess Marguerite would do it," he replied in an undertone.

Catherine looked relieved.

"Good," she said. "He shall have that word."

Charles had already recovered from his recent fit of depression; Navarre's gay humour acted like a tonic upon his jaded nerves.

"You come as you should, when you are wanted, Harry," he said, smiling into the dark, whimsical face, "Tavannes and Anjou talk ever of the State, and my mother of my soul."

Henry raised his eyebrows. "But they each propose the same remedy," he said, smiling from the King to the others who stood near, "as Ambrose Paré for your body, a little blood-letting, eh, Sire?"

Even Catherine found it impossible to wholly repress the start which these words evoked. The King of Navarre smiled again as his quick grey eyes glanced round at each disturbed and guilty face.

Then Charles laughed, a discordant, harsh laugh. "Your wits are keen since you came to Court, Harry," he said. "You must spend the night with me; you are cheerful, and I want merry company to-night."

"I should be dull to-night," responded Henry gravely. "Coligny lies badly wounded, and as yet no one has been punished."

"The Guise is banished under pain of death. Let us forget him. See, I'm writing a little poem to my Ronsard. Tavannes has no ear for verse, and no soul for poetry."

"And the poem?"

"You shall help me, Harry. My head aches, so

that I cannot think. There are only two lines worth reading, but listen—

Thy lyre whose sweet notes
Can ravish the ear,
Makes thee master of souls,
And renders thee dear.
Where no tyrant, alas !
May ever aspire,
Thou may'st fearlessly enter—
And have the Empire.

Now, listen, Harry ; 'tis these last lines that please me best—

Your words can give immortal breath,
Eternal life, where I give death.

'Where I give death.' Mon Dieu ! What a thought ; —is it not, Harry ? "

"Does not Your Majesty give life when he withholds the sword in other hands ? " replied Henry, who had been leaning over Charles's shoulder, smiling—yet without merriment.

Charles shuddered.

"Life ! Death ! We know not what they mean. I shall re-write my poem to-morrow, Henry. And you shall show me what to say. I don't think it will be to Ronsard, but to Marie." He laid his finger on his lips, glancing uneasily towards the others, who had gathered together at some distance from the two kings.

"Marie !" echoed Henry in astonishment. "Marie Belleforêt, Sire ? "

Charles gave an impatient gesture. "No, no,—Marie. My Marie. The only one who loves me in the world, excepting, perhaps, Madelon, my nurse. Hush, Henry.

My mother must not hear, or she would kill her. She is very clever, my mother, but she does not know of Marie Touchet. My Marie Touchet, who lives for *me*, for me, Henry, not for the King of France. One day, perhaps, you shall see her, unless—hush, I will not tell you more now. My head is on fire. Let's go and shoe my horse." He rose as he spoke, clutching Henry's arm nervously.

But, as they reached the door, it opened, and little Aurèle de Brie entered, bearing a letter. "For the King of Navarre," he said, presenting it to Henry with a low bow.

Henry smiled. "Permit me, Sire," he said, and broke the silken thread that bound the missive.

Charles looked on suspiciously. "Who gave you the letter?" he asked sharply of the page.

The boy hesitated, colouring to the roots of his hair, for his glance had caught that of Catherine, who had come softly up behind her son.

"A lady, Sire," he faltered.

Charles laughed.

"A lady! Harry, for shame! I must tell Margot. I'm her brother, you know."

Henry smiled. "Yes, Sire, you are her brother. The thought comforts me," he replied.

"Come, Harry," cried the King impatiently, "let's to the smithy. I want to breathe. I can't in these close rooms. But you shall stay with me and make me forget."

"Pardon, Sire. I cannot stay to-night."

"But you must stay. I want you, Harry."

"Your sister, Sire, has a stronger claim even than you."

"My sister! You don't mean to say your letter is from Margot?"

Charles's eyes were suspicious again.

Henry handed him the letter. "Will you read, Sire?"

Charles took the parchment and read, "Come at once; I need you. Margot." Then his brow wrinkled. "But this writing is not—is not——" he began, and looked from Henry to his mother.

Something in the latter's glance checked him. "You will stay with me to-night, Harry," he urged.

But Navarre only shook his head. "When a woman calls, and she the most beautiful in France, Sire," he said; "when a Queen commands, and she of your blood——"

"I ask you for your good," interrupted Charles.

But here Catherine intervened. "Henry is right not to neglect his wife," she said suavely. "He must go."

Henry shot her a keen glance. "Ventre Ste. Gris, Madame," he murmured doubtfully, "you half persuade me to stay."

"I ask you to stay," urged Charles.

But Henry only shrugged his shoulders. "I implore you, Sire, to give me permission to go," he reiterated.

"Once more I ask you, Harry," pleaded the King. "Believe me, you would be better here. Your health

would be better. Margot would be better. I should be better. But if you insist——”

“I must insist, Sire. For good or ill I go where Margot is.”

Charles turned away with a groan. “Go, then, go!” he cried. “But, for God’s sake, go quickly!”

“Thank you, Sire.”

There was no response.

The door closed upon the King of Navarre.

CHAPTER XXV
THE KING'S WORD

THERE was silence in the room after the King of Navarre had gone. Even Catherine was silent.

Suddenly Charles burst into tears. "It is fate!" he cried. "If he had loved me better he would have stayed; he would have been saved! Mother, Margot never wrote that letter!"

Catherine's taper fingers closed over her son's clenched fist. "He had to go," she murmured. "It must be all or none."

The opening of the door made them start.

"Harry," cried Charles joyfully, "you have returned?"

Yet it was not Henry of Navarre, but Henry of Guise, who advanced into the room.

Charles's eyes flashed ominously.

"Mort de ma vie! Monsieur le Duc," he muttered. "You're a bold man to venture here now. Are you not banished?"

Guise bowed. His sinister face was set in a mask of smiles, but his eyes were those of a devil and a courtier.

"Aye, Sire," he replied calmly. "I am a bold man; but bold men are what Your Majesty needs now."

Did I not promise you that danger would find me by your side ? ”

Charles laughed coldly. “ The danger is yours ; do you set your life at so little worth ? ”

“ I value it only when I can serve you, Sire. The Huguenots are arming ; they have sworn to avenge Coligny, even on the King himself.”

“ They shall have vengeance. I will give you up. Morbleu ! Could you not wait ? ”

“ For nine years I have waited, Sire ; a man may wait too long.”

Charles's face darkened.

“ Do you flout me, Monsieur le Duc ? Arrest him, Tavannes. I'll show that I am King. I'll give them justice, and they will disarm.”

“ Are you prepared to give up your mother and your brother too, Sire ? They will not disarm else.”

“ My mother and my brother ? What have the Huguenots against them ? ”

“ Does not Your Majesty know that the arquebuss that wounded Coligny has been recognized as belonging to the Duc d'Anjou ? ”

Charles wheeled round to face his brother, who was twirling his moustachioes in the background with a simpering smile on his lips.

“ You, brother ! ” he stormed. “ Mort de tous les diables ! This is too much ! And you, mother ? You, too, were privy to this ? Do you think you can force me against my will ? Mother of Heaven ! I'll show you all who reigns in France. I'll——”

Catherine's hand was laid firmly on his shoulder. "Be calm, my son," she said, exerting her strange, mesmeric power to the full as she bent her eyes on the King's quivering face. "It is too late to withdraw; it is sink or swim—the Huguenots or us."

Charles returned the gaze, his own fascinated by hers.

"If I were sure," he faltered, "if I were sure there is no chance of failure."

"The net is complete," exclaimed Guise confidently.

"And I can save Henry," pondered Charles. "He can recant."

"I have the Swiss Guard and my gentlemen," murmured Anjou, with a sigh of satisfaction at having curled his moustachios to perfection.

"Marcel, the Provost, will lead the citizens, and Cosseins guards Coligny,—Cosseins, who hates him," added Guise. "For nine years I have waited, and now at last!" His saturnine face glowed with triumph at the thought. "At last," he repeated.

"Every Catholic has a white band on his arm," said Catherine, "and a white cross on his cap; the rest must die. It is with you, Sire. Does the great bell ring from the Palace of Justice and from St. Germain de l'Auxerrois to-night?"

Guise stepped forward. "Does the cannon fire from the tower of the Tournelles to-night, Sire?" he asked.

Charles covered his face with his hands. "I'll not have Harry injured," he said.

"Sire, he must die," interposed Tavannes. "Better the head of one salmon than a thousand frogs."

"Not if he recant. Harry's no bigot. He *shall* recant."

"My son," urged Catherine, "it is he who menaces our house. It is he whose star cuts short your life. He is the great foe of all."

"None will escape to trouble me hereafter?" asked Charles in a faltering voice.

Guise laughed. It seemed indeed that the devil had entered into him that night.

"The boats are drawn up on the river bank," he replied. "The ferry is removed, we have the keys of all the city gates."

Charles sighed. "I like Harry," he said wistfully.

"He deceives you, Sire," struck in Tavannes. "He laughs at your hunting, because you hunt on horseback as a King."

"What!" cried Charles furiously. "By the splendour of Heaven! I'll hunt the boar with him on horse or foot, with spear or but a knife."

Catherine smiled. "He says that Ronsard writes your poems for you," she put in slyly.

"My poems!" exclaimed Charles with an oath. "This is too much. But you all hate him. I do not trust you, mother." And his bloodshot eyes glared fiercely around.

But Catherine did not flinch. "He plots with Margot to deceive you. The other night you went to her rooms. Who was there? Why, he, himself—Navarre."

It was the Guise's turn to start.

"What!" he cried, turning livid.

Charles raised his eyebrows. "And why not, Monsieur le Duc?"

The young noble fell back a pace, fumbling with his sword. But Catherine interposed.

"That night I stood and watched Margot's window. It was lighted within. Suddenly a form loomed up against the light, it opened the window and entered. I waited. Almost immediately it came out again. I sent my guards. They found a rope ladder in the court below. The man vanished at their approach."

"You know his name, Madame?" asked the Guise beneath his breath.

The Queen smiled. "The night was dark," she said. "They could not see his face."

Charles frowned. "But *you* know his name, mother," he said sharply.

"I have forgotten it," she replied carelessly; "there is so much to do."

But she looked at Guise and smiled again as she saw the purple scar upon his cheek.

"Yet Henry knew," growled Charles angrily. "He knew, and laughed at me. Morbleu! He shall pay for it. Fool! I would have saved him, and he laughs at me. Go, Guise, go, kill the Admiral, if you like, but kill all the Huguenots with him,—all, all, all, so that not one be left to reproach me hereafter. See to it, at once—at once, do you hear? Kill, Tavannes, kill, kill. Aha! You smile on me now, because I let you have

your way, but you should not if Harry had not deceived me. Kill, kill, kill every one—every one. It will be good for my soul—did you not say so, mother? You must swear to me that I shall not see *them* afterwards in my dreams. Promise that, mother. Bury them deep, so that I shall not see their eyes. Thrust the brown earth over them, so that they cannot scream—and so kill them. All—all——”

The frenzy fit was upon him, lashing him into more furious madness as he screamed and mouthed, so that even the Guise himself shrank back appalled.

But Catherine laid her ready hand on his arm. “Go,” she said, glancing triumphantly from Guise and Tavannes to the Duc d’Anjou. “You have heard the King’s commands. Go!”

At the word they turned and hurried from the room, leaving the King screaming after them—

“Kill, kill, kill.”

Anjou was pale, but the Guise’s face was alight with fiendish joy.

“At last!” he cried. “Come, de Besme, come, Tavannes. Let the tocsin sound. Let the cannon fire! To Coligny! Then Henry of Navarre shall know what it is to thwart the Guise. No prayer or sword shall stay my hand to-night. Not Margot, not the King, no, not the Pope himself should save the Béarnais from his doom.”

CHAPTER XXVI

MARGUERITE OF NAVARRE

THE hour of midnight was fast approaching, yet a restlessness seemed to pervade the palace of the Louvre.

Dark figures might be seen flitting across passages and down corridors. Doors opened softly and closed as noiselessly, voices whispered, once or twice a weapon fell clattering on to the ground, or a man cursed aloud. After which the silence became more intense.

In the Chamber, Charles was playing primero with some of his gentlemen—amongst them the Huguenot, de Rochefoucauld. Some say the King pressed his favourite to play till morning, but the young Duke excused himself on plea of weariness.

Catherine de Medici did not leave her son's side till late, and when at last she retired she looked haggard and nervous.

It was a night of anticipation,—of fears. Even the Queen-Mother's ladies—the famous Flying Squadron—had been locked in their special apartments with a stout guard of Anjou's Swiss as sentries.

The Queen of Navarre had come to her rooms at

last. Marie Belleforêt was awaiting her, as she had that other evening—was it two nights ago or an eternity ?

Mother of Heaven ! How the time seemed to drag.

The tension, felt, but indefinable, kept the Queen from attempting to unrobe ; instead she paced up and down, starting when a sentry challenged another in the courtyard below, and again when the sound of footsteps was heard outside the door.

Marie, her blue eyes bright with excitement, stood near the window. Although the night was sultry, she shivered. Over there amongst the twinkling lights of the city Arthur de Mouhy was sleeping. Or was he awake, looking out at the stars, as she was doing, thinking of her as she of him ?

The Queen of Navarre gave a heavy sigh, and Marie came to earth again from her dreams amongst those glittering stars.

“ What is it, Madame ? ” she asked apprehensively.

“ I don’t know, Marie,” replied Marguerite ; “ I feel that something is going to happen.” She came to the girl’s side as she spoke, and stood leaning out. “ How quiet the town is, like a city of the dead. Yet there is a rustle in the air like the wind in far-off woods, like the sound of a distant sea, a sound one only feels.”

She stretched her hands out into the darkness, the breeze stirring the dark curls which clustered about her brow.

"Aha!"

The cry startled Marie. "What is it, Madame?" she exclaimed in sudden fear.

Marguerite had darted back into the room, covering her face with her hands. "It was a bat, it is an evil thing, an omen, it spells misfortune."

Marie crossed herself. "Fear not, Madame," she faltered. "It has flown away as quickly as it came."

But the Queen's face was white with terror, whilst she held her hand to her heart. "It has left a shiver here," she moaned. "Oh, I know there is something strange on foot. When I left my mother's apartments to-night my sister Claude clung to me and begged me not to go."

"Oh, Madame," cried Marie, "why did you come, then?"

"Because, if anything happens, I want to be near my husband. Where is Monsieur de Mouhy?"

"He has gone to his lodgings at the 'Sign of the Belle Étoile.'"

"And my husband—the King of Navarre?"

"He is with King Charles."

"Good! I am glad he is safe with Charles. Oh, why did I not have patience? Why did I send that ribbon? Why did I listen even for a moment to the Guise?"

"Because, Madame, your husband neglected you, because he treated you shamefully."

But Marguerite only flung herself sobbing into a

chair. "He saw the Guise here," she moaned. "He'll never believe me again."

Marie set her small teeth viciously into a rosy lip. "I hope he loves you," she said vindictively, "because then he is suffering as he has made you suffer. Then you are revenged." And she tossed her fair head disdainfully.

But pride and Marguerite had bidden each other farewell for the nonce.

To-night she was all woman and none at all Princess.

"I don't want revenge," she whispered piteously; "I thought I did, but I only want to be loved, loved as a woman, just for myself; and day by day love beats his wings and flies a little farther off."

"He will come back," replied Marie, comfortingly, kneeling beside her, and twining a loving arm round her mistress's waist. "He will come back; you are a Princess and fair."

"Men say so, he told me so, and I believed him. Love's a strange creature, Marie; he kisses the beggar with uncoifed hair that tumbles down her back, he forgets to look beneath a crown. Yet he will not love a woman for her poverty, nor hate her for her silken gown; roses will not win him, and no one knows his way."

In spite of herself Marie could not help smiling, though her eyes were hid from her mistress. Yes, love was a strange creature—and yet how fair when by chance one met him singing on life's road. Her

heart throbbed gladly as she thought of the man who had stood side by side with her when thus they met.

A knock at the door broke meditations gold and grey.
It was the King of Navarre who entered.

CHAPTER XXVII

"I AM YOURS, HARRY"

MARGUERITE had risen, her pale face flushed crimson as any bashful maid's beneath a lover's first kiss.

She had seen a look in grey eyes which she had never dared hope to see again. For very joy she lowered her own lids as she curtsied. But Henry did not stand on ceremony.

"It is late," he said, advancing eagerly. "I came as soon as the King would allow me. You wish to see me?"

Not the words, but the quiver in the strong voice broke down the last barrier of pride and reserve.

The eyes raised to Henry's were swimming in happy tears.

"For two whole days," she whispered, "I have hoped that every footfall might be yours, for two whole days, and yet I dared not send for you."

"Dared not?"

There was a whimsical note underlying the tender chiding of the voice.

Marie had withdrawn into the inner room, where she stood smiling towards the silent stars.

"You saw me with the Guise," cried Marguerite, her face first pale then crimson. "Sire, I am innocent. It is true I loathed this marriage. I had not seen you since I was a child. They told me you were rough and light of love; but, when I met you, and you spoke to me of my picture, there was truth in your eyes and reverence in your voice. Then you changed again, and I longed to punish you. I sent a token to the Guise; ere it was gone my repentance had begun. I tried to get it back, it was too late. He came to my rooms, and I repulsed him, then—then, Sire, I called on you."

A silence; only eyes told their tale, yet told it eloquently enough.

Then Henry knelt, bowing his head over her little hand.

"Thank God I heard you," he said reverently. "I shall hear that cry with joy until I die. It is not you who were to blame, but I. See, love, I ask your pardon." And he looked up into her face.

Through a mist of tears Marguerite smiled down on him.

"You!"

"Yes," he said simply. "For I loved you, Margot, and loving you I doubted you. Love should know no doubts. But I was not wholly to blame. I would have placed my life, my honour, in those little hands, but my comrades—I had no right to risk their lives too."

"I do not understand."

"Do you not know why the King gave me his sister for a bride?"

"Why, yes. To prevent brother from killing brother, to bring peace to France."

"So I thought. And so it is. Yet the peace is to be that which comes with death."

Horror leapt into the dark eyes.

"Death!"

Henry shuddered. "Yes, this marriage was to bring the Huguenots together that he might massacre us," he said gloomily.

"Massacre! No, no! And I was the lure, the bait to trap you with? Ah, Henry, you knew this, and yet you could love me—could love me?"

Tenderly Navarre drew the trembling girl to his side. "Yes," he replied softly; "for I looked into your eyes, Margot, and saw the truth. I knew you at least were innocent. When did you first love me, sweetheart?"

"The day your eyes shone on me from the crowd. When did you first love me?"

"Before I saw you, Margot."

She raised her finger and set it on his lips.

"You must not jest with love, Harry."

"Nay," he whispered, "I woo with him instead." And he kissed her as a lover should, thus sealing new-born happiness.

"Nay, I saw your picture, Margot. Your shadow was dearer to me than the self of other women. I loved you more when I looked into your eyes, and when I

heard your voice. Sweetheart, we have plucked love's thorns, shall we not gather his roses ? ”

Marguerite gave a little sigh of content as she twined her arms about his neck, laying her head against his shoulder.

“ I am yours, Harry. Yours now—always. You may command me as you will. Take me, Harry, where we shall be safe ; take me to Nérac, to your mountain home, the mountains which will shut us so securely in from all fear—all fear. I was afraid to-night, love—before you came. This place—this city oppressed me. Death seemed so near, life such a far-off vision, whilst now—now.”

She smiled at him through happy tears.

“ My life and love,” he whispered tenderly. “ And you will go with me to Nérac—to the dreary wilderness from the glitter and gaiety of the Court ? ”

She laughed gaily.

“ Youth and joy,” she replied, “ are where the sunshine is—and you are my sun, Harry, that is why sometimes, looking in your eyes, I grow dazzled with too much happiness.”

Henry caught back his breath. His grey eyes shone indeed as he bent to kiss those lips which were raised to invite his caress.

“ My Queen, my Margot, my wife,” he murmured. Yet even as they stood thus in that radiant moment of love's glory, a great bell struck one.

Marguerite started.

“ What's that ? ” she whispered,

Henry laughed.

"Nothing. A bell. What matter to us? To-night I have found my heaven," and he held her closer. Again the solemn bell tolled forth with a deep, ominous sound, from the Church of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, opposite to the Louvre.

"Boom—boom."

Was that the sound of a cannon firing from the tower of the Tournelles?

A moment's pause. Then, on the third stroke of that knell-like signal, a sudden clashing of bells from north and west, east and south of the sleeping city rang out their wild tocsin.

Clash, clash, peal, peal. Loudly, more loudly, as though in maddest merriment chimed the bells. Loudly, more loudly, clearly, more clearly, seemed to fall the echo of their song.

"Come and slay, come and slay, come and slay." The King of Navarre, loosening his hold of the clinging figure in his arms, had rushed to the window.

It was open, so that the clamour of the bells was wafted clearly enough into the room. Another sound too—less loud yet more insistent. The tramp, tramp of hurrying feet, echoing and re-echoing through the streets.

"The streets swarm like a rifled hive," muttered Henry. "Ventre Ste. Gris, how they hum. Look, Margot, see how the people throng below—yet silently—silently as though they were ghosts, not men. Ghosts

to walk the streets of Paris whilst the tocsin rings. What does it mean ? ”

Marguerite crept to his side, clinging to his arm.

“ Something dreadful is afoot,” she whispered. “ All the evening my heart has warned me, but I tried not to listen. My sister Claude wept when I said good night, and tried to keep me ! ”

Henry’s face had grown pale. “ Claude tried to keep you ! ” he exclaimed. “ Charles tried to keep me.”

Marguerite shivered.

“ Then why did you leave him ? ” she cried. “ Go back, Harry, oh ! go back at once.”

“ Nay,” he said gently. “ I would not have stopped for a thousand kings after receiving that letter of yours.”

“ Letter of mine ? I did not write to you ! ”

“ But I have your letter here,” he replied, laying his hand over his heart. “ It is the first time you have ever written to me, sweet.”

Marguerite was trembling from head to foot. “ I did *not* write,” she cried. “ Give me the letter, Harry. Let me see it—quickly—at once.”

Henry slipped his hand into his doublet and drew forth the billet.

“ Here it is,” said he simply.

Marguerite snatched the paper from him eagerly. The presentiment of evil seemed to be growing greater every moment.

At sight of the fine, delicate handwriting she turned

still paler. "This is not my hand!" she cried hoarsely. "It is my mother's."

"Your mother's," muttered Henry. "Now I remember Charles would have told me, and she stopped him!"

"What does it mean?" whispered Marguerite in terror, for the noise in the streets was growing steadily louder.

No ghosts were those who silently threaded the streets below, but rather human tigers remorselessly stalking their innocent and unsuspecting prey.

The dull, booming hum, which at first rose and fell like the distant breaking of waves on the rocks, had risen now to the roar of a tempest surging and beating amongst the houses and through the narrow streets.

A scream rose shrill on the night air. Shots followed in rapid succession, a laugh echoed high above the tumult, like the merry-making of fiends, a voice from the darkness shrieked madly—

"Kill, kill, kill. Bleeding is as good in August as in May. Kill, kill."

And above all the mad clashing of the tocsin which pealed upwards to the darkened heavens—up to the silent stars which looked down so calmly upon that scene of carnage and terror. Laughter, shrieks, pealing bells—and now, mingled with the sound, the echo of a song reaching to the ears—reaching to the hearts—of the two who stood by that open window,

hand-in-hand, with the horror deepening in their eyes—

“Every street shall be a grave,
A corpse shall float on every wave
The Huguenots shall die.”

Henry of Navarre drew himself up with a groan which seemed wrung with heart's agony.

“My God, it has come at last!” he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

GUESTS FOR JEAN MEREAC

THE landlord of the "Belle Etoile" was doing a thriving trade. Never had so many guests crowded into that front parlour of his before.

Certainly business was flourishing; he had not even time to curse the heretics as he had been doing so heartily for the last six weeks.

They were fools, these Huguenots! he spat, even whilst he cursed. A poor lean-visaged set who never drank more than a half bottle of thin wine at a sitting, and would be as contented with an omelette or a fowl as with the daintiest—and most expensive—dinner ever cooked. But they were not Huguenots who entered the "Belle Etoile" to-night, but gentlemen. Ma foi! Jean Mereac knew a gentleman when he saw one; they were those who would pay their twelve sols for dinner and twenty for bed without a murmur, whether they came on horse or foot, whilst those beasts of Huguenots would haggle over the last sou. Again the worthy landlord spat.

Never mind, never mind, however. There were good times coming, when there would only be gentlemen left to come to the "Belle Etoile" and order

their dinners of dainty morsels, such as his wife knew so well how to cook; for who in Paris could compete with her in preparing a fricassee of frogs with olives, or porpoise flavoured with garlic and stuffed with cloves and Italian sausage; or, again, who could serve up a larded crane with the same artistic skill as la belle Jacqueline? All these were questions, you understand, questions which Jean would ask when he was in a good temper, standing with his fat legs apart, slapping his broad chest.

He was in a good temper to-night, but he was too busy to ask questions, for his guests were thirsty—very thirsty. Perhaps they had ridden far, perhaps not. If you had asked the sentry at the Porte St. Marcel or at the Porte St. Germain, he would have told you that very few Messieurs had ridden into Paris that Saturday evening.

But if you had put the same question to the Abbot of Ste. Genéviève, he might have replied quite differently, for, you see, the worthy Abbot was the good friend of Monsieur de Guise—and the Abbey gardens were most conveniently skirted by the city wall. So, to-night, Paris was full of unexpected visitors, and there were other landlords who were kept busy besides he of the “Belle Etoile.”

What wine they drank—those strangers—and how merry they were!

Friends of Monsieur de Guise?

That was enough for Jean Mereac. How his tongue clacked! One might have thought that Monsieur le

Duc was an angel from heaven to hear him talk. And, according to Jean, all Paris spoke the same language—all, that is, who were not Huguenots.

The wine cups were full now, the worthy little landlord had more time to talk. They were beasts, those heretics—beasts. He had heard it said that since they had entered Paris no mad dog had been seen—the devils which usually possessed them had entered these men who mocked at the Blessed Mother of God herself and pointed the finger of scorn at the holy images.

It was wonderful how eloquent Jean could be, on occasions, about the affairs of religion, considering that he himself rarely attended Mass, and counted up his sols and his crown pieces more often far than he counted his beads.

But the Huguenots would ruin trade if they became popular,—they, who would prefer the commonest wine of Cahors before the luscious softness of Burgundy or the rich sweetness of Armagnac.

But presently Jean Mereac laid a cautious finger on his lips, for his pretty daughter Louise had whispered in his ear, and thus silence fell amongst the merry roysterers as the outer door opened to admit a tall figure dressed in black velvet. It was Monsieur de Mouhy.

The young man glanced carelessly through the open door of the parlour as he passed on his way upstairs; but he did not enter, for he had already supped, and was on his way to bed. Jean Mereac nodded sily to his other guests as the door closed overhead.

"It is the friend of the King of Navarre," said he, "Monsieur de Mouhy." And he spat as though the name had an ill flavour.

One of the Guisards laughed.

"A wedding guest," he mocked. "Mille diables ! He wears a sour enough face and sombre enough trappings."

"As for that," chuckled another beneath his breath, "the Huguenots will be gay enough to-night—since their favours will be crimson."

"Hist !" growled a comrade. "Do you want to put the whining Calvinist above on his guard ?"

"You need not fear, Messieurs," put in the landlord ; "the walls are thick, he will not hear."

"Certainly he will very shortly hear nothing at all !" retorted the first speaker. "How many birds of his plumage have you nesting here, my friend ?"

"Only that one," replied Mereac hastily, "and his servant, a lout of a fellow who understands nothing but his own vile Gascon jargon. The 'Belle Etoile' will be well rid of them."

"And the world too, for that matter," was the laughing reply. "But there will be pockets to rifle, friend Mereac. Well ! well ! we will leave you your ewe lamb. He will not take much killing, and we all have our business to-night. Come, comrades, we must to the meeting-place. It is said the Duke will give us our orders himself. Ha, ha ! We shall have a night of it. There will be some pigs to squeak in Paris to-night, and I must sharpen my dagger."

Jean Mereac stood rubbing his hands gleefully as he watched his guests depart. There were many fat crowns to jingle comfortably in his pocket, and, as the tall man with the pimpled nose had said, there were more pockets upstairs which would be emptied ere morning.

But pretty Louise had a tear in her eye as she cleared away the dishes and plates, for if the lad Jacques had a halting tongue, he had a merry black eye and gay humour. Somehow Louise could not bear to picture him lying dead in the kennel without, with a knife-thrust through the heart which she guessed had quickened its beatings at sight of her.

The poor Jacques !

CHAPTER XXIX

A WARNING

MONSIEUR DE MOUHY slowly kicked off one long boot. It was the first step towards undressing, and he paused, yawning, before he proceeded to relieve himself of the other. It was true that he was sleepy—and yet restless. He wanted to dream—he also wanted to think. Yet dreams and thoughts were both to be of a piquante little lady who had tip-toed to kiss him farewell on the lips only an hour ago. He kicked off the second boot and went to the window. The stars were shining in the heavens, but he did not look at them. He gazed instead towards the dark mass of buildings from which twinkled a hundred lesser stars of light. He wondered which shone for Marie Belleforêt. His Marie! Ah, when would she be his indeed? His heart beat furiously at the thought. Marie de Mouhy. Madame de Mouhy—his wife. He was dreaming now—dreaming of the old, grey Château amongst the green woods of Jurançon, where another Madame de Mouhy, white-haired and kindly, would be waiting to welcome him—to welcome *them*. How he thrilled at the thought. His Marie! His little, blue-eyed wife. How Madame his mother would love

her; she could not help herself. Every one who saw her must love her. He could not understand why the whole world was not at her feet. And yet she loved him,—*him*, Arthur de Mouhy, the stern Huguenot soldier, who had scarcely known how to smile till she taught him. He was smiling now, smiling at those twinkling lights, his honest heart aflame with true, pure love.

Then suddenly he thought of Monsieur de Varais and frowned. He did not love Monsieur de Varais. Bah! But he could afford to smile now. Marie's heart was his—his now and for all time, whilst as for this courtier, this parasite of the Guise, why, he, like his master, was in banishment; he would not trouble him again. Monsieur de Mouhy could almost find it in his heart to wish that he would; his cheek burnt as he recalled the bully's bragging taunts as he flapped his arms and dared him to come to find death on half a dozen sword-points.

It had been a pity that he had not fought him before, as de Verais himself had suggested, yet, surely, that too had been a trap—and the watch-dog of Navarre must be careful. It was not only his own life or his own honour which he took in his hands—but his master's.

The young man's eyes softened. He loved well that master—the King of Navarre.

“Master.”

It was Jacques' voice calling to him softly from behind.

It broke a dream, and de Mouhy frowned.

“Well?” he asked sharply. “What is it, boy?”

"Ah, Monsieur, I had to come. I . . . I am afraid."

The note of fear rang clear in the young voice.

De Mouhy relented. "Afraid?" he questioned.

"What of? Your conscience, lad? Come, out with it? What mischief have you been in?"

But Jacques shook his head, stepping into the circle of light flung by a solitary candle—de Mouhy's purse strings were none of the widest.

"Ah, Monsieur," he gasped, "it is not that. But I am afraid. It is Louise."

"What! Mereac's daughter? Tut, Jacques, you are but a boy, and should have no eyes as yet for pretty wenches."

Jacques hung his head.

"Oh! Monsieur," he murmured, "it was wrong. She is a Catholic, and yet . . . and yet . . . I kissed her."

De Mouhy laughed heartily.

"Is that all your sin?" he cried, patting the boy's shoulder kindly. "I do not think you need be afraid. A maid may be a Catholic, and yet be true of heart." And he laughed again at a pleasant memory.

"But, Monsieur, it was not only the kiss—although I know Pastor Lesnier would rebuke me for that—but . . . but Louise . . . Louise . . ."

"Returned the kiss? Fie on her, for a forward wench."

"It was not the kiss at all, Monsieur, but she too seemed afraid. I think she wanted to warn me of danger, for she said something of the Duc de Guise,

and made as though stabbing first this way then that. Afterwards she would have tied a white kerchief to my arm, but I laughed and tore it off. And then her mother came into the room and scolded terribly, threatening to beat Louise, and saying many things that I did not understand. And Louise cried and looked at me, whereon her mother took her by the shoulders and thrust her out of the room. I . . . I think she locked her in her bedroom, and I could still hear Louise crying from within. Afterwards I was afraid, and so . . . and so . . . I came to you."

"Poor lad!" said de Mouhy kindly, and he looked long into the round boyish face with its brown cheeks and dark, shining eyes. He also was wondering what made Louise cry. Was there danger indeed? A nearer, more pressing danger than there had been heretofore? He recalled the crowded parlour below, the still more crowded streets. There had seemed to be an air of suppressed excitement only half hidden by masks of stolid indifference amongst the people. Was the crust of the volcano cracking? A party of merry-makers passed beneath his window on their way towards the Rue de l'Arbre Sec. They were singing over again one of those songs with which the streets daily rang—

"Hang every heretic high,
Where the crows and pigeons pass.
Let the brood of Calvin die,
Long live the Mass."

Over and over again was the last line repeated, till

it died—with the footsteps—away into silence. De Mouhy slowly drew off his doublet.

"The clouds gather," he muttered, "it is true. But the storm may be far off. Nevertheless, I shall sleep to-night in my steel corselet."

He looked down into Jacques' face. It was pale, in spite of the brown tan. "Poor child," he said, laying his hand kindly on the lad's shoulder; "it was cruel of me to bring you to this hell."

But Jacques seized the hand, covering it with kisses in the hot, impetuous fashion of the South.

"Ah, Monsieur," he sobbed, "I was a coward, a coward; I am no longer afraid, Monsieur. I am happy, quite happy. To be away from you, ah, that would be hell, Monsieur—not this Paris. To be with you—to die for you, that is all I ask of the good God," and he smiled up into Arthur de Mouhy's face with all the love-light of devotion in his childish eyes.

Ah! they knew what love meant—those children of sunny Gascony.

"Heaven keep us both," quoth de Mouhy softly. "Heaven keep us both, my brave boy."

And Jacques bowed his head.

CHAPTER XXX

A DREAM—AND ITS AWAKENING

DE MOUHY was dreaming. He was far from Paris, far, very far, from the little back room in the "Belle Etoile," far away indeed in sunny Gascony, hunting the grey wolf along a mountain gorge. Below him thundered the music of a mountain torrent, roaring and leaping over a rocky bed, till it flung itself headlong into the chasms below. Above him screamed the eagle, circling over his head with outspread wings ready to pounce should he climb too near the eyrie, where her young awaited her coming. But before him, on the path, crouched the wolf, with sharp fangs bristling over drawn-back gums. The path was narrow, so narrow that de Mouhy, hardy mountaineer though he was, shuddered as he looked down to where, far beneath, the torrent roared. Death above, death below, death before, and death behind as the pathway crumbled and broke. Yet, as he crouched there, he had no thought for death, but only of life—and in his ears rang the music of a sweet lilt that he had heard Marie Belle-forêt sing—a song of love and sunshine, whilst, from depths below, blue eyes looked up at him, sweet lips called him. Then he looked at the wolf. Horror of

horrors ! Its lean grey form was changing—the beast face was fading, and, in its place, still crouching, half wolf, half man, was Henry of Guise. He could see the livid scar on the cheek, the evil glitter of the baleful eyes—and then the creature sprang. In an instant it seemed that he was grappling with Death. Battling for dear life against fearful odds. He could feel the grip of cruel fangs in his shoulder, the weight of a heavy body pressing him back—backwards. Was it wolf ? Was it the Guise ? In the blurred dimness of dreamland the face looking into his kept changing, first man, next wolf. One moment the scarred yet handsome features of Guise, then the grey wolf-head and bristling ears. Back—ever backwards—and behind him the crumbling path, below the yawning chasm. The roar of the torrent sounded in his ears, mingling with the flapping of great wings above his head, and above all the shrill scream of a woman's voice—Marie's voice. Then he was falling, falling, the wolf-man still grappling with him, and the noise of the waters growing louder and louder. With a cry of horror the dreamer flung out his arms and awoke.

The room was dark, yet from the window a faint flare of distant lights streamed in. The noise of the roaring waters still rang in de Mouhy's ears, but it was not the rushing of the torrent now, but the clashing of bells, mad bells, wild bells, ringing out their terrible tocsin. The voice he had heard screaming was not that of Marie Belleforêt, but that of some frightened woman crying aloud in the streets below—a cry of terror,

mingled with others, shrieks, cries, yells, curses, which rose in hideous din from every quarter.

What did it mean? What did it mean? It was the question Henry of Navarre was asking in the Louvre yonder—the question every Huguenot was asking as he started from peaceful slumber on that summer's night. And the answer came to many, swift, terrible, instant. But it was Death himself who spoke it.

De Mouhy, staring up into the darkness, was already beginning to realize a little—but not yet all. He had dreamed that the Guise-wolf was grappling with him, had felt the weight of a heavy body upon his chest, had fancied that sharp fangs clutched shoulder and throat. What had that meant?

He knew the next instant. In the darkness near some one was stirring; he heard a smothered curse, and then—then a dagger struck down,—down,—missing his throat and glancing off harmlessly against the steel corselet he had put on before lying down. Again that curse and the knowledge that a strong arm was being raised for a third blow.

But de Mouhy was awake now, and—the blow did not fall; instead, two men rolled together on the floor of the little room.

Silently they fought in the darkness, yet if they had screamed none would have heard them, for the turmoil without would have drowned the shrillest cry.

Jean Mercac, the host of the "Belle Etoile," who had crept upstairs, knife in hand, to make sure of being the first to have the rifling of the Huguenot guest's

pockets, was a strong man, for all his fleshiness, since he was of Breton breed, and had muscles and sinews, though run partly to waste of late. But de Mouhy was a son of the mountains, lithe as a panther, with a wrist of iron. Before many minutes he was a-top of his antagonist, with the knife in his own hand. It was a task he shrank from, the task of killing this man here in the dark as one might kill a dog. Yet the sounds without told him that it was not the moment for mercy, and he struck.

There was silence in that little room; not even a cry had come from the figure against which he crouched; so presently he rose, his brain on fire with the one idea,—he must reach his master, he must reach the King of Navarre. Yet, even in that moment he remembered the boy Jacques, the lad who had followed him from his mountain home, and but for whom he would even now be lying dead on the pallet yonder with Jean Mereac's knife through his heart.

“ Jacques,” he cried very softly, “ Jacques.”

There was no answer. De Mouhy rose, groping his way towards the table, on which he knew lay candle and tinder. He reached it, and presently a faint yellow light illumined the room. Jean Mereac lay very still; he would not cry “ A bas les Huguenots ” again, nor spit as he spoke the words. The dagger had been sharpened carefully—it could cut through all but steel.

A sudden impulse drove de Mouhy back to the body. He had noted something. On the dead man's left arm

was bound a white sleeve, in the hat was pinned a cross of white linen. De Mouhy remembered how Louise had tried to tie a similar badge on the arm of the lad Jacques, and something made him stoop and quickly draw off the sleeve and unpin the cross, fastening the latter upon his own cap, whilst, after hastily dressing, he tied the linen sleeve upon his arm and turned to the door.

He must reach the Louvre at all costs.

Without the door he stumbled—something lay there. Re-entering the room, he snatched up the candle and returned, kneeling down, light in hand. He knew what he should find, even as, with trembling fingers, he turned the huddled body over upon its back. It was Jacques, the Gascon lad. He was quite dead. Mereac must have killed him as he slept—dog-like—without his master's door. Tears gathered in de Mouhy's eyes and splashed down on the small brown face. The dark eyes were closed, and around the rigid lips a smile was playing, as though Death in pity had surprised him dreaming of that dear home, far away amongst the wooded hills of Jurançon.

He had been afraid, the poor Jacques, before, when the first ominous warning had sounded in his ears, but he had not feared again. That was why he smiled.

De Mouhy, bending over him, with a sob in his throat, recalled the words spoken by the dead lad so short a time before.

"To be with you, Monsieur—perhaps to die for you—that is all I ask of the good God."

And God had granted him his petition.

De Mouhy rose to his feet. "Farewell, child," he muttered. "Heaven grant that I may serve my master this night as faithfully as you have served me. But for your warning I had been already dead, and, now, please God, I'll live to cry 'Navarre' once more, and strike a blow against these devils, for him and for the Cause."

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The "Belle Etoile" was deserted, it seemed, although there were lights in the empty parlour below, and, as de Mouhy stole across the passage, a door opened and a woman's head was thrust out.

"Is that you, Jean?" screamed a shrill voice. "Aha, did he die well, that beast upstairs? And the boy? Is he dead? Good, good, go to your work then, Jean, the good work doing yonder," and she laughed savagely.

De Mouhy did not reply as he hurried on, and it was as well he did not, since his voice would have betrayed him. In the shadows Jacqueline Mereac saw little of the figure, save only the gleam of the white sleeve upon the left arm.

The door clanged to behind de Mouhy, he was in the street itself. Was it indeed the Rue Etienne, —the quiet, well-known street of Paris which he had trodden so often, that he had looked down on but an hour or so since and seen deserted and still under the starlight?

Overhead, indeed, the stars still shone, but surely they looked down upon some black alley of the Inferno itself. Shrieks and shouts rose deafeningly from all sides as the great mob of soldiers and men swept down it, yelling their death-cry—"A bas les Huguenots"—"A mort"—"A mort"—"A mort." It had been arranged for the *dizainiers* to be stationed at each street corner, and in turn to enter every house which did not bear on its door the sign of the white cross. But those who ordered the massacre had reckoned without counting on the fury of the mob. It is easier to slip the leash of a bloodhound than to call it back from the trail.

Paris had turned bloodhound to-night, and only blood would satisfy her. Swept along by the crowd de Mouhy made no effort to struggle against the stream; and, indeed, to do so would have been as impossible as for a straw to set itself against a torrent. Dazed and sickened with horror at the terrible sights and sounds around him, the young man himself appeared to be in no personal danger. He was not slow to understand it. The white badge on his sleeve and cap protected him. He would have torn them off, shaming to wear for a moment the colours of such an enemy, but the thought of Navarre stayed him. At all hazards, at all costs, he must reach his King, and die, crying, "Navarre, Navarre," with his body between the Guise and his victim.

Presently the crowd parted. A Huguenot, more desperate and more agile than others, had managed

to reach the housetops, and those below swayed forward, yelling and howling like wolves who see their prey escape.

Taking advantage of the movement de Mouhy darted down a side street. To reach the Louvre was his one thought; he had no room for others, though the sobs broke in his throat as he saw men, women, yes, and little children hunted down on all sides, and killed before his eyes. Their screams rang in his ears as he ran, echoing up to the silent heavens.

"Come and slay, come and slay, come and slay," clashed on the bells, and men, turned fiends, answered the mocking peals.

But de Mouhy ran on blindly, his heart crying "Navarre!"

He was in the Rue Béthisy now. The street where Admiral Coligny lay sick, with Cosseins to guard him. To guard him! Heaven save the mark! *To guard him!*

It had been to the Rue Béthisy that Guise rode first that night. He was there now, waiting under the window of Coligny's lodgings, mounted on his black charger, a commanding figure, with proud, handsome face upraised eagerly. Around him surged the crowd, thicker here than in any other part of Paris, since the Huguenots had naturally gathered closely about their leader.

But a hush had fallen on all at the moment when de Mouhy, panting and breathless, reached the street corner.

"Is it finished?" shouted the Guise, and his voice sounded hard and cruel.

De Besme's face was thrust forth from the window above. The blood-lust was aflame in every feature.

"Yes, Monseigneur," he cried, and laughed as he turned back into the room.

The next moment a body was flung out—the body of an old grey-haired man, clad only in a torn and blood-stained night-shirt. Guise dismounted and bent over it, wiping the blood from the dead man's face.

"It is he," he cried joyfully. "After nine years my father is avenged," and, leaping once more on his horse's back, he rode through the crowd, trampling all who stood in his way, whilst he cried aloud, "A Guise, A Guise. Death to the Huguenots. Death to the Béarnais!"

It was the last cry that gave de Mouhy strength to push on his way. Yet it was slow work and dangerous, fighting against the throng, till his doublet was all but torn from his back, and the protecting cap had gone too. But the white sleeve on his arm still kept him from the daggers of those around, and soon he was running down a narrow lane which led by a short cut in the direction of the Louvre. Soon he would be there, soon he would be by his master's side. Soon . . . soon . . . Sick and giddy he still ran, but the white horror of his face would have betrayed him had a loiterer looked too close.

Suddenly a woman darted from an alley near, nearly falling into his arms—a woman young and fair, with

blue eyes staring in mad terror, and a baby girl of about three summers clasped in her arms. There was no white scarf round the sleeve of her dress, no saving badge to protect her from death, and the howls of her pursuers were growing nearer every moment. She screamed in fresh fear as she saw the man standing there with a drawn sword in his hand.

"Mercy," she wailed, "ah, mercy for my little one, my Gabrielle. *He* is dead—my husband. Oh! mercy."

The blue eyes looking into de Mouhy's were distraught with horror, yet, with a stabbing pain at his heart, the young Huguenot seemed to see Marie Belleforêt in them, to hear her voice crying, as it had cried to him in his dream. Quick as thought he had torn the white linen from his arm, and was binding it about hers.

"It will save you," he muttered, "you and the child. Get into some doorway, some house; you will not be molested if they see *that*. Quickly, they come."

She thanked him with her eyes—those blue eyes of Marie which had helped to save her—but had no time for words. She had gained the shelter of a doorway, as he had suggested, when her pursuers rushed up the alley, almost falling, as she had done, into de Mouhy's arms, or rather on to his sword. A crowd of black-frocked youths from the Sorbonne these, with their skirts tucked round their waists, and arms bared and bloody. They laughed as they ran too, as though massacring helpless men and women—whose religious

feelings forbade self-defence in most cases—were the merriest sport in the world.

“Ventre de Pape,” squealed the foremost, aping the Guise’s favourite oath, “she has gone.”

“But left another in her place,” cried a second, pointing to de Mouhy. “See, ’tis a cockerel with some fight in him, too, and so the better fun. It is dull work slaughtering sheep in the shambles.”

“Dull work!” laughed another. “You think so, Pierre? I do not agree. So the Huguenots die, I care not. There’ll not be one left alive in Paris by morning. Let us wring this pretty bird’s neck, and go forward; we are losing the best of the sport.”

“And there is the woman,” mouthed one of his comrades. “Come, kill him, and let us after her.”

They rushed forward as they spoke against de Mouhy, who had placed his back to the wall of a house, and stood, making a circle with his sword.

One student fell at its bite, and another drew back, screaming and cursing, but the rest rushed with knives uplifted. It was a terrible moment, and, brave though he was, de Mouhy knew that nothing could save him. Already the street was filling with more of the rabble. Yet, as he stood, facing Death from twenty angry eyes and half a score gleaming knives, a voice cried a truce.

It was the leader of the Sorbonnists, a truculent fellow with broad shoulders and a face which might have been good-tempered under other circumstances.

De Mouhy leant back panting. How strange to die

thus. Yet die he must, now, here. Alas ! he would it had been otherwise. If he might have died instead by his master's side, and now—now.

“Monsieur,” cried a big voice in his ear, “what is your name ?”

CHAPTER XXXI

"LONG LIVE THE MASS!"

DE MOUHY blinked. What did the question portend? He had expected death at that moment, for his arm was weary, and his foes many, and instead a brawny Sorbonnist demanded his name. No wonder that he blinked.

"Arthur de Mouhy," he replied, and threw back his head, for the name was fair and unsullied as his honour, and he had no shame in speaking it.

"Morableu! Is it possible? And the ring, Monsieur?"

De Mouhy gaped. "A ring, what ring?"

He raised his hand, wondering, and then smiled; he had forgotten the ring the astrologer's daughter had slipped on his little finger. Was it indeed to be the talisman she had foretold?

"Bianca Ruggieri," said he, eyeing his interrogator curiously.

It was too dark to note whether the fellow flushed; but de Mouhy's heart leapt in sudden hope when he answered eagerly—

"Bianca Ruggieri? Ah! Then I should have known you, *friend*. Comrades," he cried, turning

to his companions, who stood round growling, as you may have heard dogs growl when a juicy bone is snatched from them, "it is a mistake, this friend of mine has *lost* his badge. Is it not so, Monsieur?"

"Aye," replied de Mouhy, readily accepting the hint. "I lost it but now."

"It is a pity," said the student, who was no other than Pierre Grissac, Bianca's lover, "and would have proved dangerous had you not met us, comrade. As it is, I fear that we have but one apiece, with our lives tacked on to them; but, if you will tell us your destination, we will see you safe to it, and do our best to protect you."

De Mouhy bowed. "Monsieur," he replied, "I am indeed grateful. If you can help me to reach the gates of the Louvre, I shall be your debtor for all that is left to me of life."

"Nothing easier," said Grissac lightly, heedless of his comrades' murmurs. "Indeed, it will not be impossible to see you through, if you wish to pass the gates, seeing that we know the password and the countersign."

Again de Mouhy bowed. "I shall be more than grateful," he repeated. "You give me my life, Monsieur," he added in a lower key to Grissac.

"Tush," whispered the fellow warningly; "they must not know that you are a Huguenot. If they really thought you were I could not prevent them killing you, and in that case I should not dare to look Bianca in the face again. Remember, your white scarf was torn from you in the crowd."

"I will remember."

"Then let us make haste. Forward, comrades, forward to the gates of the Louvre; there will be some killing to be done there, I vow. Death to the Huguenots, death!"

And, placing de Mouhy in their midst, the party of Sorbonnists swept on, shouting and yelling at the top of their voices, "Death, death to the Huguenots. Long live the Mass. Long live the Guise."

The last cry set de Mouhy's blood tingling. He had seen Coligny die. But there was no help for it; he could reach the King of Navarre's side by no other way than with these men. Grissac kept close to him.

"Take care," he muttered from time to time. "Take care," for he heard de Mouhy's groan as horror after horror was perpetrated around them.

It was no longer Paris, but hell itself through which they hastened.

At last they had reached the gates of the Louvre, shouting the password, "Guise," "Guise," as they whirled through like some horde of ill-omened bats. There was fighting, slaying, murdering, here in the great courtyard, as well as elsewhere, for the Huguenots, chased from the palace, fled now in the vain hope of reaching the banks of the river.

"Long live the Mass!" cried Grissac and his friends. "Long live the Balafre!" "A mort les Huguenots!" But the throng was close here, so close that the Sorbonnists were parted, breaking up into detachments of

ones and twos. Only the faithful Grissac kept close to de Mouhy's side.

"I swore to save you, Monsieur," he cried, thrusting aside the arquebuss of one of Anjou's Swiss, with a great laugh, whilst he linked his arm in that of Bianca's saviour.

But, just then, when it seemed that all was to be well and the palace gained, three men came, pushing, hacking, elbowing their way through the crowd. The lights from the palace, throwing a lurid glare around, shone full on de Mouhy's face. One of the three oncomers, who wore the colours of the Guise, stopped short with a cry of savage delight.

"It is he," screamed a voice, "it is he."

Turning, de Mouhy looked into the eyes of Antoine de Varais.

CHAPTER XXXII

"NAVARRE, NAVARRE"

"HENRY, Henry," cried Marguerite of Navarre, clinging to her husband's side as she looked out upon the growing tumult. "Tell me, what has come? What is happening? Listen. Look. Ah! Mother of Heaven! I cannot understand it."

Henry groaned. "It means—the massacre," he replied. "The mob is up; it has drunk blood; there are not Huguenots enough in France to slake its thirst. Quick, dear heart, my sword, my hat; I must be gone."

She did not unloose her clasp about his arm, but rather clung the more tightly.

"What will you do?" she whispered in terror. "Where will you go?"

The King of Navarre's face was very white, but it was set with a look of determination, whilst the grey eyes gleamed; the laughter in them was killed, just then.

"To join my comrades, to share their fate," he replied steadily. "If need be, to die with them."

"No, no," wailed Marguerite. "You must not die. I cannot let you go. Look at me, Harry; I love you,

I am yours. You will not leave me to-night? Stay with me, Harry, oh, stay, stay."

The grey eyes looked tenderly into the black, but the resolve in them was unshaken even by her pleading.

"If I but could, my Margot," he sighed. "Dieu! how beautiful you are. And yet—yet. No! Do not ask me; you will not. I know I could not shun danger to-night, lest you despise me to-morrow. Honour must at times outstrip love, ma mie, and so I go. Quick, quick. Be brave, Margot, and buckle on my sword. It was the man in me that won you; I will play the man to-night."

He did not appeal in vain.

No slow and torpid blood must flow in the veins of a Princess of France. Through her tears Marguerite smiled up at him, even as she buckled on his sword with her own white hands.

"You are right, Harry," she cried. "I would rather lose you than lose my love for you."

He bent his head to the level of her lips.

"My brave Margot," he whispered. Then turned to the door.

But she could not let him go thus.

Running to him, she looked once more into the dark face which to-night had lost for ever its expression of buoyant youth.

"One last look into your eyes, my love, my love. Oh! how I love you, Harry, and it is that love which has brought you to your death."

He took her in his arms.

"No, Margot, never say that. A thousand times no. Kiss me, love, and so farewell, farewell."

He laid her, half swooning, in a chair, bending for one last kiss, and so left her.

Listening, she could hear his steps hurrying down the corridor—dying away in the distance. Without, bells clashed and people roared as they went like beasts of the forest to their feast of blood.

Flinging herself on her knees on the *prie-Dieu* in the corner of the room, Marguerite raised her hands as though in supplication to the small carved image of the Virgin and Child on the little table before her.

"Mother of Heaven!" she wailed, "who suffered so on earth, plead for me now. Let me not suffer more than I can bear, let me not be the instrument of his death."

Frantic shrieks arose from the streets below, howls of rage, the clashing of bells, the firing of shots.

Marguerite's tears flowed—faster and faster.

"Mother of God," she moaned, covering her face with her hands, whilst her unbound tresses fell in a mantle of glossiest black about her shoulders, "listen to my prayer, and give me back my love or let me die."

The door was flung open even as she prayed, and Marie Belleforêt, in a delirium of terror, rushed in. The girl's dress was dishevelled, her blue eyes bright with a horror which was akin to madness.

"Madame, Madame," she screamed, "they are fighting in the Court-yard. Oh, I cannot look, it is too

horrible!" And she sank cowering by her mistress's side.

But Marguerite's moment of weakness had passed. The courage, which was her birthright, came to her aid in the need to comfort the poor child who knelt sobbing by her side.

"Is *he* there?" she muttered. "Holy saints protect him. Blessed Mary guard him. Oh, Marie, I must see—must see."

And she rose to her feet, staggering towards the window.

It was as Marie had said.

In the Court-yard below a hideous pandemonium reigned. It was too terrible a sight for any woman to gaze at, yet Marguerite stood rigid.

"It is Soubise," she muttered, "and—and others. Oh, merciful heavens, where is my husband? Ah! there is one who escapes them—he is running towards the palace. The cowards, the cowards, they are after him. Ten to one, they in steel corselets and he—ah, Marie!"

She turned, with a gesture of shuddering pity, to where the girl still lay crouching.

"Marie!"

The last exclamation brought the terrified child to her feet. Instinct warned her what that note of compassion in her mistress's voice meant.

"Oh, Madame," she wailed, "it is not—it is not—Arthur—it——"

"It is Monsieur de Mouhy," muttered Marguerite,

who was leaning from the window again,—“yes, de Mouhy. Ah! the brave one! see, he wards them off, his sword is round him like lightning. Good heart, good arm, he will fight his way through yet.”

Marie had joined her by this time. With arms about each other's waists they both bent forward, staring eagerly down to where, amongst the surging mass of men, stood the tall figure of Arthur de Mouhy, fighting desperately against three assailants, who pressed him close.

“It is de Varais!” groaned Marie. “Dieu de Dieu! he will kill him, he will certainly kill him, and it will be my fault. Oh! what shall I do? What shall I do?”

But Marguerite was watching the unequal combat with fascinated eyes.

“One of them is down, there are but two now, only—de Varais reels back; it was a good blow that. Look, Marie, look, de Mouhy will escape them yet, he has darted under their guard, he is running again towards the palace. This way, Monsieur, this way.”

Her voice rose shrill as she leant out, crying aloud to the man who ran with staggering gait and blood streaming from his forehead towards the palace doors.

But Marie screamed in fresh terror.

“Oh, see, Madame, de Varais is after him, he is overtaking him. Oh, it is the devil himself; look at his face. See, he is down, he is down. Merciful Lord! He will be killed. Arthur! Arthur!”

It was true.

On the ground lay a figure in a dishevelled dress,

prone, helpless. But only for a moment. Ere his enemy could reach him de Mouhy was on his feet again, reeling for an instant, but with blade pointed towards his adversary. Yet, alas ! it was like to be but a short fight. Although but a few paces lay between him and his goal, de Mouhy was too weak to traverse them alone. Already everything swam before his eyes, the swirl of figures that thronged him seemed to be those of dancing demons, mocking, gibing him, the clamour and tumult resolved itself into one great, menacing cry, "Death, death, death."

Even Grissac was no longer by his side, nothing lay between him and the man whose eyes burnt into his with a look of deadly hate.

Marie's face was buried against Marguerite's shoulder. She could not bear to see her lover die.

But Marguerite's own eyes shone like stars, for she had heard a distant cry in a well-known voice—

"Navarre, Navarre."

"Look, Marie," she cried, snatching her handkerchief from her bosom and waving it frantically. "It is the King, it is my husband, he will save him. Navarre, Navarre. De Mouhy has heard it. The sound of that word has brought new strength to him ; see, he beats back de Varais' blade, the crowd sweeps outwards, they hasten to the gate. Navarre, Navarre ! Fight on, de Mouhy, the King is coming." And, in her excitement, Marguerite nearly fell from the window as she leant to watch the broad-shouldered figure in black velvet which pushed its way through Swiss and

Sorbonnists alike, with its cry of “ Navarre, Navarre.” “ See,” cried Marguerite. “ They draw back afraid; he has reached him—even de Varais dare not strike now; side by side they gain the palace doors; they enter. Heaven be praised! Oh, Holy Mary! May I not forget. Quick, Marie, open the door, open. See how the crowd sways back. Brave bullies, you hesitate, you dare not follow. Navarre, Navarre!” As she spoke she turned from the window, reaching the door even before Marie.

“ They are coming, they are coming!” she cried joyfully. “ They will be safe here.”

Moments of suspense, however, were those that followed—long, dragging minutes, each an eternity to the two women who waited. Had murder indeed already found its way into the Palace? Had Death met those two, whom they loved, even when they cried, “ Peace and safety?”

With clasped hands and straining eyes they waited, and at last heard footsteps coming down the passage, not hasty steps as of men running for dear life, but halting and slow.

It was soon explained when Henry entered, half carrying de Mouhy in his arms.

“ Bolt the door, Margot,” he cried. “ Quick, Marie, some wine; quick, he is fainting.”

As he spoke he placed his swooning follower in a chair, whilst Marie, calm now in the moment of action, knelt by de Mouhy’s side, raising a glass to his pale lips.

He drank, slowly and painfully, with deep sighs

between each mouthful ; but presently a faint colour crept into his cheeks and his eyelids unclosed.

"Can you speak?" demanded Henry, who stood by, looking from the wounded man to the window with gloomy eyes and furrowed brow.

De Mouhy's hand strayed feebly to his sword-hilt. "Save yourself, Sire," he gasped, "save yourself. The Catholics are up."

"Then I must join Coligny," replied Henry sternly, and moved towards the door.

De Mouhy shuddered.

"Coligny is dead!"

"Dead," muttered Henry, turning pale.

De Mouhy bowed his head.

"La Rochefoucauld is slain. Soubise, Pardaillieu, and Piles lie dead below. The Catholics, white band on arm and white cross on their hats, are murdering man and woman alike. By morn they swear there will not be a Huguenot alive, even the children are butchered before their parents' eyes."

"I must go," said Henry, gripping his sword-hilt, his swarthy face aflame with passionate horror.

From without fresh howls of rage, more peals of ribald laughter, rose on the air.

"Let the brood of Calvin die
Long live the Mass,"

yelled the populace.

Marguerite gave a faint scream. "No, no, Henry," she cried piteously. "I let you go once, but not again. Even honour does not require it of you. Surely your

duty lies here." And she caught his hand, pressing it to her heart.

"Sire, you must not go," gasped de Mouhy. "You are our last hope. If you die, the faith dies too."

Henry hesitated. There was truth in those words, and Marguerite's eyes were eloquent.

"You are sure Coligny is slain?" he asked.

"I saw them butcher him, Sire."

Henry's eyes flashed, the thin line of his moustache seemed to bristle as it was wont to do when any fierce emotion moved him.

"Them!" he thundered. "Who?"

"Need you ask, Sire? The Guise, Anjou, and his Swiss Guard were all there. I saw their colours—white, black, and green."

"The Guise,—Anjou!"

"It was de Besme who did the deed."

Henry flung back his dark head.

"De Besme! De Besme," he cried. "You are right, de Mouhy, I must not die yet."

"De Besme and Scarlabous. They threw the Admiral from the window right at the Guise's feet—he was not minded that his vengeance should miscarry, and so would fain satisfy himself. The mob licked their chops and snarled like hungry wolves. Guise kicked the body when he had gazed long into the dead face and known it for that of his enemy, and I heard him cry: 'We have killed the lion, now for the young cub, now for Navarre.' Dazed, sick at heart, fighting, and praying, I gained the Palace. I knew that I must save you,

you are our last hope. Sire, I have warned you, and I die."

As he finished speaking de Mouhy fell back in a dead faint.

Marie ran to his side.

"Arthur, Arthur," she cried, taking one limp hand in hers. "Oh, Arthur, speak to me! It is I—Marie. Oh, speak, speak! It cannot be that you are *dead*."

"Nay, child," replied Henry kindly, "he is not dead; under your care, I wager he'll soon be as much alive as any of us. Heigho, and more than most of us. Come, may I carry him into your inner chamber, Margot? and Marie shall look after him for me."

Without waiting for a reply, he raised de Mouhy's unconscious form in his arms, and carried him tenderly enough into Marguerite's bedroom, laying him upon the bed—an incongruous enough burden for so dainty a resting-place—a tattered, dishevelled, blood-stained body amongst soft white cambric and laces.

Still, it was not a moment for ceremony, but of life and death, and, even as Marie bent over her wounded lover, loosening, with trembling fingers, the fastenings of the corselet which had saved its wearer's life more than once that night, Henry had stepped back into the outer room.

Marguerite was busy pinning a white cross into the black velvet cap her husband had left upon the table, but Henry did not appear to notice it. Taking the cap from her hands, he placed it on his head, drew his sword, and slipped his left arm round his wife's waist.

She was trembling violently.

Outside in the passage came the tramping of feet and the shouting of men's voices. “ A Guise—A Guise ! ”

“ They come,” whispered Marguerite, and glanced feverishly around.

Henry smiled faintly as he looked down into her eyes.

“ Good-bye, Margot,” he said solemnly. “ Good-bye, my love—my wife.”

And he kissed her as those who kiss for the last time on earth.

But she would not let him go.

“ No, no,” she cried, “ not yet—not yet.” And she made haste to tie a white scarf about his arm.

Louder and nearer came the cries.

“ A Guise—A Guise ! Death to the Huguenots. Death to the Béarnais.”

Henry strove to free himself from the clinging arms, but Marguerite was beside herself now with terror, and refused to loosen her hold.

“ Let me go, dear heart,” he urged gently. “ Do you think I will stay to be butchered before your eyes ? ”

“ But you must not go yet,” she moaned, not knowing what she said, so that she kept him. “ I love you, I love you, Harry. Stay with me to-night.”

“ If I but could. But, no, Margot, I'll die fighting.”

“ Madame, Madame,” it was Marie who came running in from the inner chamber, terrified by the noise of approaching footsteps and cries.

“ Oh, Madame, are they coming to kill us ? ”

But Marguerite's eyes were on her husband's face.

"Fight them here," she pleaded. "Fight them here. I have no fear."

He hesitated, bewildered at that crucial moment as to how best to act.

But Marguerite's thoughts were working faster. She had a husband's life to save, and her woman's wit did not fail her in her sore need.

"Open the door, Marie," she cried, "and run, run to the King, my brother. Tell him, if he loves Margot, to come here at once."

Marie hurried to the door.

"A Guise—A Guise—A Guise!" cried the voices without, but the girl had no fear at that moment. If the King of Navarre were saved, so would her lover be.

Opening the door, she slipped out even as a band of men rushed in.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE VENGEANCE OF THE GUISE

ON the threshold of the Queen of Navarre's apartment stood the Guise—devil indeed, now, more than man—his face ghastly with excitement, excepting where the scar ran across his cheek in a purple weal; his eyes were ablaze with passion and hate as he looked at the two—the man and woman who stood there, in the centre of the room, together. His drawn sword was dripping with blood to the hilt, his whole aspect denoted one who had come straight from the shambles without.

Behind the Guise crowded his followers, Tavannes, de Besme, de Varais, and others, all more beasts than human beings, with the brand of Cain scored deep on every lowering brow.

But Henry, standing now a little before his wife, with his sword also bare in his hand, laughed, that mocking laugh, which showed bristling moustache between drawn down nose and curling chin.

"So you are come, de Guise?" he cried tauntingly, "you and your brother butchers. Ha, ha. De Besme, of all men in the world, I wanted to see you. Look, the Admiral's blood is still bright upon your arm!

Come on. You kill an old man sleeping; but you have not yet done with the Béarnais."

But Marshal Tavannes pushed forward to Guise's side.

"This is no place for you, Princess," he said. "Will you retire?"

There was a moment's pause whilst all eyes were turned to Marguerite, who stood, pale, but resolute, beside the table, a little behind Henry.

She drew herself up as Tavannes spoke with all the haughtiness of a Valois—all the pride of a woman—in her dark eyes.

"My place is by my husband's side," she replied coldly. "I remain, Monsieur."

Guise had been watching her narrowly as she spoke, and his cruel eyes glowed.

It was true then that she loved this Béarnais. Well, he had come for vengeance, and he would have it; no woman flouted the Guise twice, and no man thwarted him the second time.

"If she will have it so, it must be so. Down with him!" he cried, and leapt forward, as you might see a tiger cat leap upon its prey, with snarling curse and lips drawn back tight over his gums.

But Navarre laughed, that merry, dare-devil laugh of his, which was born again with the breath of the oncoming fight, whilst his sword swept him a circle as he backed towards the window.

Marguerite stood petrified. Could she indeed see her husband die? Yet she did not scream, knowing that

her pain, thus proclaimed, would daunt the man who was about to fight for his life ; so she stood there, rigid, motionless, her hands clasped in silent prayer, her eyes fixed on that figure with its back to the window, that strong, brave figure in its suit of black velvet, with dark head silhouetted against the light of glaring torches without.

She could read the mockery and fury in the grey eyes, and knew he was thinking of Coligny ; she saw them soften and then grow hard, and guessed that he thought of her—and what her fate might be—afterwards. And, at that, her white teeth drew blood from the quivering lip which she must fain bite to keep back the scream of agony.

“Come on,” cried Henry tauntingly, “come on, my merry butchers. The wedding favours are crimson, as one warned me they should be, and you will not find a white one on the cheek which Marguerite of Navarre has kissed.”

At those words Guise screamed with fury, and would have sprung blindly upon his mocking foe had not Tavannes caught him by the arm.

“Monsieur le Duc,” he said sullenly, “the King must be obeyed. See, the young fox has fooled us, after all. No wonder he speaks bravely—look, de Besme, look at his arm ! This is no place for soldiers, with a turncoat.”

And he pointed to Henry’s left arm, on which Marguerite had tied the white scarf.

Guise drew back, but his eyes were still savage.

"Turncoat," cried Henry. "Who dares say that word to Navarre?" and he made a step forward towards Tavannes.

But the latter pointed grimly to the scarf. "Aye, turncoat! You knew the King would spare you if you recanted."

Henry glanced down at his sleeve, his cheek flushing with anger as he noticed the silken band.

"Ventre Ste. Gris!" he stormed. "Who did this?"

Tavannes laughed.

"A kingdom is worth a Mass—eh, my brave Béarnais?" he gibed.

But already Henry was tearing off the white scarf.

Marguerite ran forward.

"No, no," she cried, panting, as she looked from her husband to the group of men who stood so near, with swords drawn and murderous eyes. "Harry, wear it for my sake. Wear it, and my brother will save you." And she shuddered as she marked the blood on the blades of Guise and the rest.

But Henry had already flung the scarf upon the floor.

"No, Margot, no," he muttered; "not even for you will I endure dishonour."

"You do well," sneered Guise. "I swear if you donned the double cross of the Guise it should not spare you to-night,"

Henry laughed scornfully.

"Ah, you are brave with Paris armed behind you, Monsieur," he scoffed. "You crawled from the window

when last we met. Come, be a man, and fight me foot to foot, fight me like a gentleman of France."

But Guise only drew back snarling.

"Think you I have forgot? No man laughs at the Guise and lives. On him, men!"

Henry had pushed Marguerite from him; he was ready for those who came, and only laughed as they made their rush.

"A Guise! A Guise!" they screamed, and de Varais' voice was loudest—he had not forgot who had baulked him of his prey out yonder in the Court-yard.

But it was not at de Varais that Henry looked. Backing once more to the window, he made a sudden lunge, striking fiercely at de Besme, who had been one of the foremost in the attack.

So unexpected was the blow, so deadly the thrust, that de Besme fell, or ever he could strike back at his antagonist, and lay upon the floor with the blood pouring from his mouth.

"That for Coligny, Monsieur de Besme," cried Henry, with another ringing laugh, which was all mockery and no mirth. "Who's next? What! you, de Varais? It is a shame to deprive de Mouhy of his due; but, since he is busy elsewhere, with blue eyes to watch over him, I'll do his work, and make carrion of a scoundrel!" and he slashed out at the big Guisard, who came rushing at him with all the fury of a maddened bull.

Marguerite caught back her breath in a gasp of fear. He would be killed—must be killed, now, for Tavannes'

blade flashed this way, and that of de Varais' the other, with Guise behind, ready to strike the death blow to the man he hated.

But Henry was something besides a swordsman; from his babyhood he had been an athlete, trained in the exercise of his body, and not even de Mouhy himself could compete with his King in agility of movement and the quick, spring-like movement of his strong young wrist.

Leaping, diving, striking—and each time to the purpose, Navarre held his foes at bay. Now de Varais was down, a curse choked in his throat as Henry's blade slit it.

"Kill him! kill him!" screamed the Guise, pushing his way past Tavannes.

But Henry only laughed; the fighting mood was on him, and his grey eyes sparkled with the zest of the game.

Yet death must be the end, he knew that even as he heard Marguerite sob, and felt his wrist slacken.

"Now!" cried the Guise, "now!" And he raised his sword.

"Hold!" thundered a voice in the doorway.
"Hold!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

"I AM THE KING"

IT was King Charles himself who stood there in the open doorway.

In the noise of the fray his approach had been unheard—unseen.

Even Marguerite had been deaf to the sound of the opening door till the welcome voice rang out over the din of clashing steel.

All had recoiled at the word of command, standing, with lowered blades, staring at the figure on the threshold.

"The King!" cried Tavannes, "the King!"

But, after the first shock of surprise, Guise sprang forward again, urging his followers on, as the hunter does when the hounds, for the moment, have lost the trail of the flying deer.

"Why do you pause?" he cried fiercely, fearing, knowing, that his opportunity was slipping from him. "Ventre de Pape! Run the heretic through. Quick! I command it."

Still they hesitated, wavering, some with their eyes fixed on Guise, others on Charles, whilst a few looked askance, to where, beyond the bodies of de Besme and de Varais, stood the terrible figure in black velvet,

which leant coolly back now against the window-sill, with dripping blade lowered but not sheathed, and eyes fixed curiously upon King Charles's face.

"Command!" roared the King, his pale face growing purple with anger.

"By the splendour of Heaven! You *dare*! Let a man stir, and his head shall pay for it."

"Sire, you forget," interposed Guise. "It must be all or none. You said it. You have given us his life, and, by all the saints, I'll have it."

Charles frowned.

"What the King gives the King can take away," he replied coldly.

Then the devil leapt into the Guise's eyes again. "Before the King's guards arrive, come, cut him down," he screamed recklessly. "A Guise—A Guise! Death to the Béarnais."

"A Guise—A Guise!" cried some of his followers, but Tavannes was silent.

Henry of Navarre stood erect and ready. But the foes who had sprung forward with their leader's cry on their lips, halted before they came within measure of his sword.

Charles was choking with inarticulate rage, whilst he poured forth a torrent of terrible oaths.

"Nançay, Nançay!" he shrieked, to his Captain of the Guard. "Hither! What! Am I not King of France?"

White to the lips, Guise was yet bold to beard even the King's fury.

"King of France!" he cried sneeringly, "but I would have you know, Sire, that the Guise rules in Paris. Do you hear the populace without? Listen!"

He raised his hand. Through the open window came the roar from a thousand throats.

"Death to the Huguenots! Death to the Huguenots! A Guise! A Guise!"

"Dare you ask that mob to stay its hand, Sire?" cried Guise passionately. "It is you who have set those mouths gaping for blood; dare you thwart them of their prey?"

Charles shuddered.

"Merciful saints!" he groaned. "What have I done? What monster have I raised?"

Guise laughed triumphantly.

"The Guise rules to-night," he replied. "I have sworn an oath, Sire, and the Guise keeps his word."

"Then keep it now," cried Henry of Navarre, stepping boldly forward.

"I will!" retorted Guise, with a sinister laugh. "Down with him, men!"

Marguerite, who still stood apart, white and trembling, gave a low cry of terror.

But it was Henry, not Charles, who waved back the ring of fierce assassins who closed round him at their leader's word.

"Stop!" he cried, and turned to Guise.

"Do you know this ring?" he asked, and held out his hand. On the third finger sparkled a ring

set with emeralds and diamonds in the device of a double cross.

"It is mine," was the instant reply. "I parted with it some two days gone."

Henry smiled. "If the Guise keeps his word," he said, "let him keep it now. You promised me what I should ask of you."

Guise changed colour.

"Morbleu!" he stammered. "It was a trap! You would ask for your life?"

"My life!"

Henry's laugh was cold.

"Should I take it at the Guise's hand, stained with Coligny's blood? No; you promised to meet me face to face, when I said you were afraid. Shall I say it again?"

"Pardieu!" growled Guise, his face stormy, his eyes ablaze. "No! Come on! Stand back, men. The Guise keeps his word."

No one spoke as the two stepped forward into the circle of candle-light, pushing aside the table, whilst the Guisards gathered together in one corner, whispering amongst themselves, and looking askance from those in the centre of the room to the pale-faced King, who stood in the doorway, with Tavannes and Nançay on one side of him and his sister on the other. Marguerite was very white, saving for a red spot burning on each cheek, whilst her breath came in great, eager gasps.

They were fighting for her, and she knew it. Huguenot and Catholic? Yes, they were that. Murderer

and avenger of Coligny?—that too. But lover of Marguerite de Valois?—that above all.

So they fought, the men who loved the fairest woman in France, and hated each other with an equal passion. But Guise had been busy that night. His arm ached with the hacking of defenceless men and women. Before his eyes visions of blood seemed to waver. Ghosts of murdered Huguenots cried perchance in his ear, or slipped ever between him and that point for which he vainly aimed on Henry's breast.

Thus it was that the Guisards, watching, grew pale, glancing at each other with frightened eyes as they saw the figure in grey give back step by step before the one in black.

Nearer and nearer to the window they drew, and Henry was driving his adversary before him with a smile of triumph parting his lips.

Charles gripped Marguerite's hand, holding it as in a vice in his excitement; but the Princess felt no pain, was scarcely conscious of the grasp—she was watching the two—the grey and the black figures—which backed slowly to the window.

At last there was a cry, an exclamation from Tavannes, a louder one from the Guisards, and a little laugh of exultation from Marguerite.

The Guise stood unarmed, with Henry's sword at his throat, his dark eyes rolling wildly.

The King of Navarre paused ere driving the blade home.

"Now, Coligny, you are avenged!" he cried, and

the fury in his grey eyes seemed to burn down into the Guise's blackened soul.

Death was grey-eyed for him that night.

"Stop!"

It was Charles who cried, raising his arm in command as he spoke.

His blade still pointed, Navarre turned.

"Sire!"

The King was smiling. A poor, twisted grin at best, but yet a smile.

"Let him go, Harry," he said, with a gesture of contempt.

Henry lowered his blade, relaxing his hold on Guise's arm.

"Sire, you are the King," he muttered. "But he is your enemy as well as mine."

"I do not fear him," retorted Charles, and then shivered, glancing nervously behind him to where his guards stood ranged.

"I have done that will kill my sleep for ever," he whispered. "But I would save you—let him go."

Henry turned contemptuously upon his adversary. "Go," said he. "Your King has saved you."

Guise stood silent, his arms folded across his breast, his eyelids lowered. He was pale, but the haughty look had not left his face.

"Perhaps he has saved himself," he said coldly. Then suddenly he raised his dark eyes to meet those of his enemy.

"I hate you for this, Henry of Navarre," he

said passionately, "but the Guise will not prove ungrateful."

And, bowing to the King, he hastily left the apartment, without even glancing in Marguerite's direction.

CHAPTER XXXV

"MY MARGUERITE"

HENRY of Navarre knelt at the feet of the King of France. The Guisards had followed their leader, and Tavannes had slunk off after them.

"Sire, Sire," Henry was crying, "how can I thank you?"

Charles was trembling with emotion, but he laid his hand kindly on his cousin's shoulder.

"By holding to the life that I have given you," he replied. "By keeping the upstart Lorraine from too much power."

As he spoke a roar of welcome went up from the streets without.

"A Guise—A Guise!" rang out the shout again, and yet again, "A Guise—A Guise!"

"You hear them?" muttered Charles. "But, Harry, he will never reign. My time is short, and I see many things. I thought you but an idler, who only woke to a chase or fête. I was wrong, you will be King, you will bring peace where I have brought a sword," and he sighed, passing his hand over his forehead; whilst Henry, pitying, read in those fear-haunted eyes the mad remorse and terror which was never to leave them

till the Huguenot nurse, his one faithful friend, brought peace to the dying King by her message of forgiveness for a crime which, after all, was but the impulse of a diseased mind unhinged by cruel persecutors who had refused to let him rest till he consented to the massacre.

Perhaps Henry of Navarre, with his keen knowledge of men and shrewd foresight, understood something of that long struggle, that terrible failure, that bitter remorse, for he knelt readily to kiss the hand which, though it had given him life, had dealt death to his people.

"Good night, Margot," whispered Charles, kissing his sister tenderly. "Nançay, place your trusted guards before the door; see not a soul enters, not the Queen-Mother herself."

Nançay saluted and retired.

Charles turned to Henry.

"Good night, Harry," he said with emotion.

The two Kings, whose destinies both led them to the throne of France, yet whose fates were so widely dissimilar, looked into each other's eyes.

There were tears in those of Henry of Navarre as he bowed again over the trembling hand his cousin extended to him.

"Good night, Sire," he murmured. "God give you rest."

Charles turned away with a groan.

"There is no rest for me," he replied beneath his breath. "No—not even in the grave, for *they* will be there. Aye! beyond the grave *they* will follow me.

Listen!" He raised his hand, his blue eyes staring in vague horror towards the window. Yells of fury, screams of agony rose shrilly still from below.

The Bartholomew was not yet over. But the King of France was powerless.

Through the blood-drenched streets rode the Duke of Guise at the head of his followers—those followers who, for weeks past, had been entering Paris secretly through the postern gate in the Abbey garden of Ste. Genéviève. Wherever the proud, saturnine face with its livid scar and haughty features was seen, cries of joy and acclamations of welcome arose.

It was the night of the Guise's triumph—and of his failure. He rode through his enemies' blood—yet away from the side of Marguerite.

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In her chamber in the Palace of the Louvre sat Catherine de Medici. It was her triumph, too, for was she not listening to the death cries of her bitterest foes? Coligny was dead, La Rochefoucauld was dead, thousands of Huguenots lay dead in the streets without, yet there was a cloud on that mask-like face, the dark eyes were troubled with a hidden fear, the white, taper fingers clenched and unclenched, for before her stood the Florentine astrologer, Cosmo Ruggieri.

"The Béarnais is dead?" she whispered softly, but Ruggieri shook his head.

"Not so, Madame," he replied. "He is alive—and he will live. The obscuring clouds are gone, the danger which threatened his life is passed, his star

shines now more clearly than it did at the hour of his birth. The Béarnais will be King."

Catherine dropped her face between her hands.

"In vain," she muttered, "in vain. I cannot fight against fate. He has triumphed, this Béarnais—this son of Jeanne d'Albert, who I hated. It is all in vain."

Ruggieri smiled as he turned and left the apartment.

"I have paid my debt," he whispered to himself. "Yes, Fate and the Béarnais have triumphed; it is well."

In another chamber of the Louvre a girl knelt by a sick man's side.

"Arthur," whispered Marie Belleforêt, "Arthur, we are safe. The King gives you your life."

De Mouhy opened his eyes.

"And my master?" he whispered.

"Is safe too! Was not that understood? The King saved him from the Guise. Oh, Arthur, what horrors! What bloodshed."

De Mouhy raised himself on the couch to which they had carried him.

"I can think of nothing," he whispered. "See nothing—now."

"Arthur!—what mean you—you——?"

He put his arm about her neck as she knelt there, half-frightened, half-understanding.

"I look in your eyes, sweet," he whispered, "and see nought beyond. Is there any need?"

She was laughing very softly as she stooped to kiss his brow.

"Let us look long," she said, "and forget all save that we love one another, my Arthur."

And de Mouhy smiled, knowing that the Bartholomew had brought to him not death, but life and love. And, being very human, he accepted the gift and thanked God, forgetting—for the time at least—all the black horror which lay in the shadows behind.

The dawn broke in the east—broke in all the splendour of golden August—all the beauty of a summer's day. Broke, too, on what? On a sacked and blood-stained city, on scenes of such horror and such terror as needed rather the blackness of a winter's night to hide, on piles of the dead lying in the streets, on the sparkling waters of the river dyed red and made hideous by floating corpses, whilst, on the fresh, sweet breezes of morning, were carried the wailings of children, the screams of women, the hoarse cries of men.

The Guise still rode through Paris, and his cry was still, "Kill—kill!"

But there were two, at least, in the palace yonder who looked no longer down on those ghastly streets, but above, to where, amongst rosy cloudlets and the faint primrose glow of early day, still gleamed the star of love.

"Margot," whispered Henry of Navarre. "My wife."

She turned to him slowly, her eyes, bright with tears, yet brighter still with the glow caught from the eastern skies, aye, and from deep down in that throbbing heart which leapt in response to his appeal.

“At last, Harry, at last—for the first time since the Church made us one, we are alone.”

She rested her dark head on his breast with a sigh of content, yet there was a ring of sadness in his voice as he clasped her yet more tightly.

“Alone, indeed! I have lost friends and freedom—all, save you.”

Marguerite smiled, raising her eyes to his as she pointed to where the morning star shone like some glittering jewel in the heavens.

“Save me—and hope,” she whispered.

The lovelight shone deep in the grey eyes looking down into hers as Henry gently took her face between his hands.

“My Queen! My Queen of Marguerites,” he whispered.

And even France was little to him in that moment when her lips met his.

THE END

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